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Poetry

NORTHWEST



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# POETRY NORTHWEST

VOLUME THIRTY-THREE

NUMBER ONE

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# POETRY NORTHWEST

SPRING 1992

*William Olsen*

Three Poems

## THE HUMAN BRAIN

They say that memory is electrical,  
 along with the constant arrival of our sorrow,  
 that bells and meat, thunder and lightning  
 are mirrored by molecular learning inside the cell,  
 and every time we read a book or hear a lecture  
 little bumps on our dendrites swell and explode.  
 They say the gas station I reach with my friend  
 in a Ford Galaxy appears as a cellular alphabet  
 emitting a shower of neurotransmitters  
 across the spaces between axon and dendrite.  
 That even our wish for the gas station to be there  
 is like looking through a diamond of calcium ions.  
 The gas station unfolded a kind of black rose  
 of oily light wherein we sat feeling protected from the  
     theories of night,  
 though I thought I could hear the dirt  
 from his home town drop out of his laughter,  
 and so the past sieves through us endlessly.  
 Potassium expelled as sodium rushes in.  
 This is my only memory of this friend  
 and what it means has faded with why we stopped  
 or why better than his face I remember  
 some kind of bug flying into an insect zapper,  
 tiny executions which made us laugh

### Are You Moving?

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and now are stored in a sprawling sequence of neurons  
as forms of sensitization and habituation  
in cells, each built like the old Philco radio  
I remember my mother waxing poetic on  
without this practiced detachment.  
We killed an elf owl that night with our headlight,  
stumbled out of our car and saw it on the road.  
Head missing and still it was there, triggering  
so many engrams and ion channels—none of which  
constitutes this elf owl unable to think itself  
back to the creosote one of us pitched it in.  
And what I want my subatomic indifference to tell me is  
how the sight of it could have made so  
cozy a nest in some cerebral treetop of  
these singing nerves, but the nucleotides  
aren't saying anything even if they know.  
I may never find a way out of this desert.  
While a new snow blows across Lake Michigan from Wisconsin,  
I'm watching the brain of Sergei Eisenstein  
in a jar of formaldehyde on TV. A crass  
*60 Minutes* story on a very literal Soviet Braintrust:  
Stalin's, Nijinsky's, Gorky's. And all  
the unfinished scripts of Sergei Eisenstein  
lost in the dark woods of his neural brainmeat—  
sliced thin as mica to put under the microscope.  
We all remember the scene in *Potemkin*  
where through sheer neglect the baby carriage  
drops down an infinite case of marble stairs  
there's no way back from seeing or believing.  
The sight of the baby's face is what we remember beyond  
revolution—  
blessed by the benediction of the lens,  
that transparent carnation you could be sucked  
into and be preserved and hurled by a blue shaft  
of light above the faces of the moviegoers.  
Among whom I as one some fifteen years ago.  
If I turned from the afterlife of the narrative up there on  
the screen  
I saw neon exit signs eating up the dark.

This was before my long-gone friend and I  
stared at the elf owl that got in the way  
of our car and turned out to be no tragedy.  
Its neck steamed little seahorse wisps of steam

there's also no way back from seeing or believing.  
Yet it seems almost immoral to talk about  
this sequence of events as agonistic  
and antagonistic molecules without which there  
would be no black branch of a desert highway,  
no all-night gas station and no frying bugs.  
The moon looked like a prop watching over us.  
My friend's arm, tattooed with a hummingbird,  
slung indifferently over an inert steering wheel  
while insects fried out loud: so many laughable  
electrocutions constitute the past, which is a desert night.  
Even remorse is a lightning storm of synaptosomes,  
without which no one is sitting in the movies,  
no one is slicing the brain of Sergei Eisenstein  
and no one's unfiled wishes spend so many  
dark years afloat in refrigerator light.  
Then the knife sinks to the bottom of genius.  
It's practically snowing genius tonight, the roads outside  
are lined with scree of plowed snow, new snow  
oozing to old in this bottomless night.  
And each fat drop the icicles turn out  
is practically a moral imperative  
to stop thinking of memory as punishment  
or guilt as anything but theory for  
processes too minuscule to mourn.

## NATURAL HISTORY

Rows of finches, each strapped like the murderer  
of gnats, mayflies, and mosquitoes that they were,  
breast after yellow breast in strict finch witness,  
brothers and sisters

behind glass cases in the Field Museum,  
claws curled into little balls around nothing at all—  
Mrs. Dunning led us through this underwater  
glow called the Bird Room,

her giggling first graders, the little clients of her  
untroubled guidance, though what could she teach us?  
That fluorescent light was some huge timelessness,  
fearless and brainless

as the skull of the limp-wristed tyrannosaur.  
Our teacher was now pointing at this skyscraper  
with vertebrae that made a crazy elevator  
up to a steam-shovel

jaw that scooped up nothing but a lot of air.  
We drew to it as infants to a mother,  
we cowered under it, it towered over our  
time in its swamp light.

What could have pulled us from this Mesozoic sight  
but the marvellous giftshop? I bought a kit,  
a plastic guillotine complete with wicker  
basket to catch the

aristocratic head again and again.  
This kit was somehow what I set my lights on.  
All crime would be punished again and again  
in my revolution.

And yet I felt sorry for the tyrannosaur  
or the almost inhuman sight of our bus driver

exhaling dead smoke, green dashlight smeared all  
over his glasses,

as deep into Daylight Savings as he could wait,  
embalmed like a mummy in the winding sheet  
of his exhalations, unloved or worse,  
unthought of, yet there—

The engine coughed on, headlights drilled through water-down.  
And there I sat, the little executioner  
watching the snowflakes strange and vagrant before  
sidewalks destroyed them,

our footprints still trudging up the museum  
steps without us or any ancient teacher.  
Streetlights were haloed in snow's stupefaction—  
angelic, it glistened

all the way down from heaven to Chicago.  
And skyscrapers half-vanished in a white cloud  
and one of them was where my father worked  
all through my childhood.

## RAPTORS

How strange it is these two eagles seem so small,  
like someone's aging father and mother. It's because  
they're caged behind chicken wire, a browned Christmas tree  
to shit on, white down matted against the wire  
and flocking the Christmas tree as if these raptors were  
the harbingers of winter all spring.  
And I would tell you this and how these two eagles  
look bleaker than sometimes our parents do when they turn to us  
the hunched, loquacious sadness of their backs,  
but some mood plays havoc on your face, you seem to be  
anything but the near thing you are. So when  
you wave to me from the other side of the cage,  
it's almost as if you wave to me from your very own planet Earth—



in these dark woods where even introspection seems evasive,  
forever mooring us to our botched intentions,  
whatever feeling comes over your face steps across  
an Acheron of its own making.  
Here where we push ourselves into each last frown or smile  
and fall through this joy to which there seems no bottom,  
the male grips a slung strand of rope  
while the female swooshes in a curtain call toward the opposite end  
with a rat's tail like a shoestring hanging from her beak,  
then shrieks its *cac cac cac* out of almost nothing we could rue—  
but I am afraid the eagles have their own theories of joy,  
that to these two black angels  
not even Dante could engage in talk, joy has talons  
along with two eyes which never see one another,  
two wings that can appear from almost nowhere in the sky,  
barely rousing the world below in a shuddering wind,  
joy that would join the raven feeding on roadkill  
washed in exhaust and memorized mouthful  
by mouthful and burned away by rain—  
joy shrugging into depths no ray can reach,  
joy of the ghastly realm the captors love to hate,  
joy caged and waiting and parental, broken-winged  
joy we never feel at home in, joy at the ethereal blood  
the slaughterhouse of a sunset had been hoarding,  
joy at every outcry gone beyond recall,  
joy at almost nothing  
that could ever speak to us clearly,  
joy at whatever eats away our hearts.

Philip Dacey

Two Poems

THE NEIGHBORS

"Ask yourself who you would prefer as a  
neighbor—Saddam Hussein or George Bush."  
—Mary Jane Laub, *Christian Science Monitor*  
Feb. 25, 1991

I walk out my front door  
to enjoy the summer evening,  
the silk hand of a breeze.  
Immediately eastward,  
Saddam is watering his lawn.  
He sees me and waves absentmindedly,  
absorbed in the sound of the drops slapping grass.  
On the west side, George reclines  
in a lounge chair, a newspaper folded on his lap  
as he looks at nothing in particular,  
a car passing, a bird hopping at a distance.

They're good neighbors.  
It's true I worried when they moved in,  
one right after the other,  
I had heard stories.  
And there I was between them.  
But I have seen them pass each other on the street  
with an acknowledging nod  
and even sometimes chat for a while  
before they part with smiles and touches  
on the arm, the back.  
From time to time I borrow things, too,  
a ladder from Saddam, a drill from George.  
As I said, they're good neighbors.

Only occasionally  
a small hand pushes up  
from the ground their lots enclose,  
breaking the level green,  
the fingers uncurling

toward the light  
and moving with an appearance  
of great expressiveness,  
and then only briefly  
before a small engine starts up  
and low blades  
whirr quietly, restoring  
the uninterrupted  
and peaceful expanse  
of the neighborhood  
we take such pride and pleasure in  
on summer evenings  
like this one.

#### THE WOUND

*for Leo Dangel*

"... where a man's wound is, that is where  
his genius will be."

—Robert Bly, *Iron John*

These hemorrhoids are killing me,  
but I know they mean something good.  
I've always wanted to be a writer.

So I'm unreeling a plot  
out of these little bloody balls,  
I'm making a song  
out of each red note.

And when I sit the wrong way  
and it hurts, I'll know it's only  
my literary asset: the Muse  
pinching me, up to her old  
particular brand of foreplay again.

Of course, I would have preferred  
a war wound, shrapnel in a shoulder  
that aches ecstatically,

or a knife wound sustained  
when I rescued a beautiful woman  
from a street gang, but  
it's all the same in the end:

my poems will be fundamentally  
sound, and my stories  
get to the bottom  
of the human heart,  
how we go  
and go on,  
divided against ourselves  
but cheeky.

*Lowell Jaeger*

#### ON FACING MIRO'S "TETE"

It's the mind on all fours having climbed  
as once I scrambled in my sleep halfway  
up the cellar stairs and woke in my nightmare  
where the door to the floor above loomed  
like a green moon I could run to  
and close behind me.

I'd dreamed again that night the light  
of lights in the atomic darkness. *Look away,*  
Mother warned, her last words  
blaring like the yellow trumpet of civil defense  
from the power pole in the play yard  
close outside my school. That's what I heard  
as they marched us single file to the under-  
ground: Mother's alarm.

O, yes. I was such a nervous boy.  
*Very imaginative,* the teachers reported.  
So once a month they shut us from daylight,

cross-legged on the concrete, my spine  
erect against the cinderblock  
—as my mother-the-siren screamed—  
and I sat smiling with eyes wide  
and blinded in contemplation of doom.

I wasn't old enough not to look  
at what others more snug in themselves  
couldn't see. In the era of the bomb  
shelter, on weekends fathers dug the family tomb  
while neighbors sputtered over Geiger counters,  
stores of drinking water, blankets, dried beans,  
new-built basement shelves and how long  
do tins of crackers last.

I've never lived with this danger passed.  
In the dream, I've filed again downstairs  
in the long wait for the walls to tremble  
and echo at the last. A nerve explodes  
in me and I'm leaping three, four rungs  
up the ladder to the exit, so absolutely sick  
of it all not even Mother on her tall pole  
can hold me. Then I'm on all fours

climbing, bound toward that door, the moon,  
when below me mushrooms a cold white blast.  
*Look away*, I tell myself. But I turn. . . .  
Mother remembers only finding me naked  
halfway up the cellar stairs, groping in the dark,  
my face twisting, wincing, drawn. In my hand,  
her double-bell Wesclock pounding out another dawn.

*Mona Van Duyn*

## Three Poems

THE CHOICE  
(minimalist sonnet)

Blind love,  
awake,  
will shove  
by mistake

the word  
I write  
toward absurd  
or trite.

So I'll keep  
my heart  
in the sleep  
of art,

untrue  
to you.

MIRANDA GROWS UP  
(minimalist sonnet)

Prospero  
foreknew  
what snow  
could do:  
half-kill  
the beguiled,  
heart-chill  
his child.

But she  
forgave  
what swirled

on every  
brave  
new world.

A CERTAIN AGE  
(minimalist sonnet)

Say "May I?"  
the child  
is told by  
her mild

exegete  
is the way  
to the sweet,  
to the play.

But I'm  
abused  
since Time  
refused

to say  
I may.



THE FARMER AND HIS WIFE

1. The farmer and his wife  
rise early, eat  
an extraordinary breakfast,  
and move on to the first  
chore of the day.  
The farmer feeds  
the two chickens he owns;  
his wife, rubbing sleep  
from her eyes,  
approaches the barn.
2. The farmer, rising early,  
finds that his wife is  
not beside him in bed.  
He moves to the window,  
seeing only  
the sleeping barn  
and two approaching  
chickens.
3. The farmer, having risen  
early, breakfasts before  
waking his wife.  
Without her, eating is  
like feeding.  
He returns to the bedroom  
to find daylight peering in;  
his wife is either missing  
or has dressed mysteriously  
in black.
4. The farmer, always  
an early riser, finds that  
something extraordinary  
has happened.  
He has lost his wife.

"Maybe she has gone off  
without breakfast,"  
he thinks, rubbing his eyes,  
and spends  
the better part of the day  
rummaging through the barn,  
missing his chores,  
and terrifying his  
two chickens.

5. The farmer, though  
intending to rise early,  
lies lost in sleep.  
His wife, having prepared  
breakfast as if  
nothing were amiss,  
begins her chores.

THE DESK-MAKER

The desk was designed  
by night, whittled  
out of white wood  
that was as new  
as the moon.

Its maker was no more  
than a child.  
He built the desk  
for play;  
he slept during  
the hours of daylight  
in a secret drawer.

He placed a picture  
of his mother  
on the top, to look  
into his eye and say,  
"Sleep well. . . ."

Pencils and stamps  
tucked in the corners  
of his sheet,  
bottles of blue ink  
ran in rivers

which the desk-maker  
rafted—  
riding his white wood,  
sighting by his mother  
and the new moon.

#### THE NIGHT LAUNDRY

I rise at noon  
and climb into  
the big basket.

As soon as  
night falls,  
I will be tossed  
into a heap  
at the bottom  
of the sky.

Overhead,  
the stars work  
hard to make  
everything white.

I sleep and  
sleep, dreaming  
of finished shirts  
and perfect  
color rinsing.

Pale water  
is wrung out  
of the moon.

#### Molly Tenenbaum

#### THE HUNDRED-YEAR FLOODS COULD COME EVERY YEAR

We expected forsythia first, then plum, lilac and rose.  
We got a blur, as if color had blended to rain.  
The days were waves, and we were cells  
patterning with other cells—not that we could see  
a particular spiral or strange attractor,  
but occasionally a tail would flick around a corner,  
we might hear a tongue, and those faint senses  
may have licked lightly at what we'd been or become,  
caboose and window-stained passengers in a tapering  
view on the other arm of a curve.  
It seemed, when the alarm rang, it was our alarm,  
and we were up. It was our job  
to pet the cat whether he appeared  
as a rock, a small pool, or a vague section  
of shade under a tree. Lines were as likely  
as other swirls, and we found them in sash and sill,  
wavering sieves of the scene. Outside, the rain  
poured through our fingers, or our fingers  
combed the rain. Our eyes were sky-colored, and the sky—  
watered, white, darkening—seemed familiar,  
though we couldn't see exactly:  
when we rubbed the fabric with finger and thumb,  
it fanned into dew. We stood next to the car, ready for work.  
Likely, we would arrive there. Possibly, the steering  
wheel would blister out leaf bud, flower spray,  
tires root oak, tread crust  
rivers of bark. It was our job to enter  
the car and drive, whether or not  
foliage took over, our blood and eyes  
as bright as eyes, skin wet  
with glistening new green folds;  
our job to walk, if that day our legs were water,  
if that day our feet were mist, our amble  
a billow of particles, wild and white.

*John Lindgren*

DIALOGUE WITH A CORPSE

"Where are the hands?" I asked.

*The right hand is looking for what  
the left hand smuggled through a mirror.  
It is searching for its twin lost at birth.*

"And what is the left hand?"

*The left hand known of the right,  
but he won't be tempted.*

"Where are the legs?"

*One leg has taken root and blossomed  
into an apple tree. The other is walking  
on the far side of death, looking for the way home.*

"And what does it report?"

*Nothing. Nothing at all.*

"What are the lungs?"

*Trees that have never seen moonlight.  
Beneath them the blood carries an empty boat  
which will never reach the sea.*

"What are the ears?"

*Shells deafened by a stone's shout.  
Wells whose bottoms have fallen out.*

"Where are the eyes?"

*Only when the left eye is voyaging  
does the right eye dream.*

"And what does it dream?"

*It is dreaming of the left eye, a black moon  
in a winter night endless and blue.*

"What is the mouth?"

*Words like flowers in the green silence of grass.*

"No. What is the mouth?"

*A bird that has flown the nest, leaving  
the tongue like an unborn syllable.*

"One last time. What is the mouth?"

*An echo drifting back to its source.  
A leaf or the memory of a leaf falling*

*toward the shadow that once owned it.  
Because only half the story is true,  
and the other half is always finished  
in silence.*

*June Frankland Baker*

PLEASE SEND

It was Martin Van Buren who suggested  
value in a "charity of silence."

We, the unlisted directors,  
request whatever you can give.  
All names, incidents you send  
will be kept confidential  
in accordance with our principle of silence  
(for any action or flaw of character  
that does not need exploration  
for the public welfare). Thereby we relieve  
all donors of the burden of casting abroad  
such news, and allow them,  
when they seek status or power,  
to escape the temptation  
of promoting sensational tidings.

We accept any revelations sent to us  
and dispose of them promptly,  
without aid of computers,  
in a vault of silence  
set aside for that purpose.

We send no receipts.  
Please use your own stamp,  
or don't write us at all  
but bury the information permanently,  
away from groundwater,  
in a place of your own devising.  
Thus you would save the country



further expense, and find yourself  
in our announcement honoring  
our most cherished supporters.  
This we guarantee will be widely withheld,  
at the end of this drive, from the media  
in order to bestow upon you  
all those rewards of silence  
you so richly deserve.

*Rod Tullis*

Two Poems

### LAKE CARLOS AT SUNSET

We were sitting outside your uncle's bait shop  
in the cooling breeze of a screened-in porch,  
finally safe from the mosquitoes  
that invaded every evening  
like the night itself.

On the other side of the lake,  
the campfires from the state park  
had already become visible,  
the smoke rising into a cloud  
of stored light.

You stopped reading long enough  
to tell me  
about the loon's nest  
you'd photographed the day before,  
while canoeing the Long Prairie River,

how the egg was centered perfectly  
over fifteen feet of water,  
the coontail reaching up from the bottom  
like the arms of a drowned man  
who was only trying to rise.

Downshore, past the small beach  
where once again several toys  
had been abandoned for dreams,  
where the few colors left on the water  
had washed up into the reeds,

the neighbor's daughter was floating off  
on an air mattress,  
her laughter scattering out  
over the trail of light behind her  
like bread crumbs.

She was balanced so delicately  
that when she slipped into the water,  
there was nothing  
the guy with her could do  
but wait for her to climb his body out.

That night, as the fishing boats flipped  
on their lights and headed home,  
as you slipped a T-shirt  
down over your swimsuit  
and brushed back your wet hair,

the fires in the park were growing wild,  
the shadows and light spilling over  
the far side of the lake.  
But it was more than that,  
they appeared to be drifting,

as if each had been built  
hastily, on a raft,  
and pushed out from shore  
to free the souls of all those  
who'd ever fallen through the ice.

Your uncle was still inside  
skimming dead shiners from the tank

with the bad aerator.  
Every night, he'd fill his bucket with a death  
so miniaturized he could easily handle it,

then he'd carry it slowly down  
to the same spot on the dock,  
and empty it out  
into all that darkness  
where the northerns were always waiting.

It didn't strike me as that odd  
that your aunt and uncle hadn't slept  
together in years.  
Our smaller compromises were already beginning  
to feel as natural as desire,

and besides, there's no one voice  
inside of us.  
They're all ours, and like the loon  
we question every sound  
to see if it means anything.

#### AT THE WATER'S EDGE

*to Sara*

Tonight, after the heron  
has grabbed the last streak of color  
from the still water, a dark purple,  
and flown off with it  
dangling below like a snake,  
the shad will begin to jump  
and that sound, the rhythmic sound,  
of a thousand dogs lapping  
at the furthest edges of the darkness,  
will settle into this valley like a fog.  
After the temperature has dropped enough  
to drive me from this landscape,  
you'll sit down in the cold mud  
at the water's edge and listen

to the voices that will wash up,  
the gentle voices that will only speak  
in the hushed language of the drowned.  
Not far down the shore, at a point  
just beyond the reach of a good cast,  
where one branch of a large sycamore  
twists down like a bolt of lightning  
frozen in the thickening air,  
the youngest of the neighbor's boys,  
the sad one, will stand up in the leaves  
decomposing in the bottom of a john boat  
that I'd left, half in the water.  
His silhouette balanced there,  
darker against the dark,  
as star after star appears  
like grasshoppers kicking nervously  
on the icy surface of the night.  
At that moment, as a cluster of oak leaves  
rattles a warning to the approaching winter,  
and your fingers press into the mud,  
your face will become your mother's,  
or her mother's even, your smile theirs,  
those brief but honest smiles they'd worked  
their whole lives to pass down.

Somewhere, in the belly of these rocky hills,  
in the absence itself, where the light gathers  
into underground pools,  
the moon will be all but formed  
like a word on the tip of the tongue,  
any word, *sorry*, for instance,  
or like the sculpture in the mud beside you,  
the smooth, still wet, abstraction  
that you have yet to name.

## THE MOONS OF URANUS

Often what is darkest, say, the moons  
of Uranus, we shine names upon.  
Against last night's argument or indifference  
we wake, lift the shade and think  
*Monday or Tuesday or May.*  
At winter's solstice it's *Christmas*  
or the lilting syllables of *Hanukkah*,  
each one a candle.  
Before they are born we name our children,  
blinding ourselves to the perils,  
blessing their passage to light.  
My Adam, my Joshua.

And so the icy moons of Uranus  
with their frozen valleys and cliffs,  
their frigid zones that do not glow  
are Ophelia, Desdemona and Rosalind.  
Even from his grave the poet speaks.  
And others with the storm of ashes  
nearly upon them say *Jesus*.  
A couple in the theater  
wish disbelief away as the curtain rises,  
while outside in the autumn night  
the heartsick swallow the harvest moon  
like a tablet.

We resemble the scientists  
who have given the barren moons of Uranus  
the beautiful names of lovers—  
Miranda, Titania, dead Juliet.  
In the dark of our house  
you call me Sweetheart.  
I still call you Love.

## AUGUST: A LUNAR ECLIPSE

Lately I have felt myself disappearing  
the way the moon becomes a copper ghost  
when the earth casts its shadow upon it.

This can happen when we leave someone.  
What we were is effaced  
in our dark meeting with grief

and we become no one.  
Though, in truth, it must have begun before:  
the steadiest, almost imperceptible

erosion that wears a boulder  
down to nothing. Ice, wind, water  
can do it, enough deception.

For years, without knowing it,  
I was the magician's assistant.  
The woman who vanishes on cue in a closet.

I may even have come to believe  
I did not exist  
without his tapping.

Then one night, as quickly as the moon  
moves through all its phases  
in a matter of hours, it was over.

That the moon returns alone  
from behind the shadow, whole again,  
seems a false ending, another sleight of hand,

but here it is, a round fact  
visible this mid-August night  
over my house.



*Sherry Rind*

AMONG THE CHOSEN

When the schoolroom door opens  
on a jumble of lunchboxes, jackets,  
and untried faces, my one child bolts  
toward me waving his first paper  
like a signal flag.

Fifty years ago a boy in Paris  
witnessed the day the men came  
to choose his yellow-starred classmates  
from among the many:

A gold star smaller than my fingernail  
shines in the upper right corner of a page  
filled with circles and sticks, his letter "a";  
but it is the boy's own light  
that draws me from all else.  
His never-ceasing voice rising high  
as a bird's, fills the air.

"You!" with a finger pointing like a knife,  
"You!" with a hand clamping the upper arm,  
"You!" a thump between the shoulderblades,

Around us, the children run to mothers  
who bend at half-mast, arms out.  
We enclose our children; we're safe  
as houses. Each child  
sports a five-pointed gold star;

until no stars remained  
but only little boys who would dream the voices  
because they knew—the way children know minutes  
are days and years never end—that a life closes  
when someone leaves the room.

each child has written for the first time  
and might remember this day.  
We laugh to see them taken  
with joy.

The names of the disappeared ones  
may be written somewhere  
but their small, unfinished souls  
left no mark.

I take their stories, my children.

*Jody Gladding*

Three Poems

HERE, A SHARK'S EYE

which looks like a moon shell  
except it spirals out from a dark  
center, just as grief

begins with a weight  
you can't fathom, dropping  
as if into water.

What is my mother now?  
What but the news of her death  
before it descends, soaring

there, weightless and true  
and not hurting anyone.  
So that, looking up at a perfect

sky, my sister knew first,  
the light accurate enough  
she had to say, no, not that.

Leaving us this body

leaving us in waves, heavier,  
and holding onto anything,

my father, near the center, sinking  
to his knees and rising from his sorrow  
with arms outstretched,

the length we call a fathom.  
He doesn't drown, but like a shark  
he has to keep moving.

He warms his chowder and  
eats it and washes the pot.  
There won't be another night

like this one, he says, no,  
not like this. His body  
is all verb, to labor, to mourn.

Then hers is lowered and the earth  
sealed again. Whatever she leaves  
me when I imagine her in summer

clothes, the birthmark on her shoulder  
my first idea of sun, isn't loneliness,  
since loneliness believes

in some other place. And I can't be  
without her anywhere but here  
holding this shark's eye

in this very light, the waves  
and the gulls' torn cry

circling, irreparably free.

## FOOTWORK

When Nijinsky died, they cut open his feet  
to find the secret of his dance. His bones,

it turns out, were like anyone's.  
Each step grinds our heels that much

deeper into earth. We have  
nowhere else to go. Once my mother

crossed and recrossed an entire field  
to find my sandal. She's gone now;

she left her darning.

## UNDERCURRENT

If he whispers the names of the birds  
to his daughter, who, in the course  
of things, will no doubt learn to speak

them, it isn't because of Adam.  
Why should she hear the names  
over their songs

which she is taking in now, all ears,  
though her eyes keep closing.  
No, it's because they've followed

an old streambed to get here.  
So many currents pour into it,  
when she dreams, she will be carried

by them, among them  
his, the human voice, full  
of wood thrush whitethroat waxwing.

*Tom Wayman*

BILLY ON INDUSTRIAL PROGRESS

He's down in the big garden  
on a cold day  
early November  
before the snow,  
having left the autumn rototilling  
this late, and Joan's old machine  
can't really handle  
the frozen topsoil  
or maybe the icy temperature  
but in any case  
the engine dies every few meters  
and when it does start again  
the machine spurts ahead as the tines  
suddenly climb on top  
of the hard ground  
and race across the surface,  
snappin Billy's head back  
as he's yanked after  
until he gets the device  
settled in again  
and turned to cover the part of the row  
it missed

At the moment, though,  
the rototiller is on its side in the dirt  
having stalled out once more  
and Billy is looking at it  
like he'd kick it  
except he knows he would kick it so hard  
he'd break his foot  
and that would hurt  
too  
so instead he stands in the field yelling  
to inform the crows and jays  
nothing has gone right for the human race

since the industrial revolution  
and the Luddites were right  
wanting to smash all machinery  
and there are people in this Valley  
he knows personally  
who will tell you the wheel  
was invented by a woman  
and since the wheel is the basis  
for every machine ever invented  
it isn't hard to point the finger  
at just who is responsible  
for things being  
the way they are

*Steven Reese*

Three Poems

ONE HALLOW'S EVEN,

after hours, and the stock procession  
of brides, buccaneers, quarterbacks,  
ranch hands, I half expect  
to answer one last knock  
and find a boy with my own dark

hair, left long in back; and his eyes,  
their kindness, their relish—yours.

No get-up, no bag; for masquerade,  
the substance of a living child.

Seen from the street,  
I'll seem a man who thought

his own front stoop preposterous  
or the world beyond his door an enormous



prank: jack-o'-lantern grins gone  
drunken, their roofs caved in;

neighbors' old sheets haunting  
oaks and maples; leaves blown chattering

against curbs, or still on their  
limbs shivering like sheet after

sheet of not quite the right words crumpled.  
And if I'm seen to reach for empty

air, to hold it close, they'll say I've  
been too long beneath that halved

apple of a moon, its lonely watch  
passing nearly close enough to touch.

#### DREAM HOUSE

You'll pass it by at first, then double  
back and double-check. Once  
you're in, you'll still think twice,

bank on routine disrepair  
to make enough demands that you feel  
handy, at least, if not at home,

tools clattering cheerfully  
as ice in a cocktail glass. Until  
one night when you're kicked

back, content—the walls  
will meet like lovers in the dark  
corners and nestle there, doorways

making shameless overtures,  
every joint in the place moaning,  
coupled, tongue and groove.

In town next day you'll pass  
some lunatic howling at traffic,  
hair like a truckload of old mufflers,

and later in the drive suspect  
it was you alone he was raving at,  
about work left to do.

You'll dream the dream that night  
of the life gone bust somehow,  
of someone after you to fix it.

#### A TWENTY

Back at the grocer's today  
where we saw your mother last  
alive—past the water wheel,  
the lobster tank,  
by the coffee urn where the pensioned mill  
workers are milling, talking golf  
in mid-December, fingers chalked  
with doughnut dust.

She was wearing one of those  
deli department lab coats,  
someone else's name tag  
pinned above the pocket.  
We were saying goodbyes. She fished  
a twenty from the coat  
pocket as she often would,  
with her quick, embarrassed laugh,  
her eyes narrowed  
as though they looked into a sun  
somewhere over our shoulders.  
As always she was flushed, dabbing  
at the nape of her neck  
with a paper towel.

We saw her again at the viewing,

satin pillowed, packed away,  
so at rest you'd hardly know her, who  
was always up and down while the family  
ate, caught naps on couches,  
in chairs. Even dying  
in the middle of the night,  
she wound up curled not in  
her bed but on the floor  
at the foot of it. Her five  
sons, who stocked freezers and  
raised steel and rallied from comas,  
her sons and I hefted  
the awkward weight  
of her absence between us.

Now the urn growls, the grounds are  
steeping; I'll need, sometime,  
to toss twenty bucks away,  
on something I can do without. Or  
just drop it from a pocket, leave  
it curled up on the floor,  
and whoever comes along  
will think first of their good  
fortune, and then for a moment  
of loss.

*Suzanne Cleary*

Two Poems

IN MY FAVORITE RECENT DREAM

In my favorite recent dream I discover my talent:  
I can do handsprings, forward and back,  
perfectly, without strain.  
I stand in the center of a white marble floor,  
possibly the lobby of a library or bank,  
and I am also perched above, watching from the rafters  
like one of the angels carved into the choir of my childhood.  
I—the I below—bend over as if I see a key near my foot  
but I've seen nothing. I bend for no reason,  
without thought or desire, place my left palm on the cold  
floor, and  
that second I am lifting from the hips, my legs scissoring  
over my head.  
There is no pressure on my arm. I am light.  
I am turning a one-handed handspring as easily  
as turning in bed, easier.  
And then I am standing. "Hey!" I call out,  
maybe to the rafters, maybe because I have no choice.  
I handspring again. Then backwards.  
Touching the marble, I see the face in my starfish reflection  
is not even flushed. Further above, I forget myself  
in watching,  
my self that is heavy, that is full of imagining.

In the dream I start to love the dream,  
a sign that I am waking. Now I am mostly in the rafters,  
the twirling me growing smaller, fading.  
I notice that I am holding on with white knuckles  
and, truth be told, the height is beginning to make me dizzy,  
I am afraid to look down. Am I still there?  
Has a crowd of admirers gathered, one of them holding  
my glasses,  
one of them handing his expensive camera to a total stranger?  
I sneeze from the dust and my whole body shakes,  
my whole brave body shakes.

## THE HORSE LATITUDES

Navigators identified the Horse Latitudes by stars  
and by noting how the waves were almost calm there,  
the nameless spot  
where the ship moved slowly and more slowly, and everyone knew  
the load would have to be lightened,  
the horses chosen.

The smallest ones, which would bring the least money, were led  
to the rail, moonlight on their flanks, their teeth,  
their watery eyes.  
The smallest ones carried the moonlight down  
to where they swam, following the ship  
for some distance.

When a man and a woman make love  
they can feel themselves pulled forward  
by something not of their making,  
call it what you will,  
as they move through the dark, star-riddled water

but what of the man on deck?  
He has chosen one star, and stares.  
He pulls his coat closer. It is thin,  
one of its buttons broken in half.  
This is how he is dressed to start his new life

which must be different from the old:  
serious, well-loved. What does he mean by these words?  
They are ways to remember things he once saw—  
two men stacking wood,  
a woman and her child asleep in the same room—

in the way that the star will come to mean  
something more than itself,  
something he cannot anticipate now, standing at the rail,  
the ship moving more and more swiftly,  
hooves circling in its wake.

## Mark Jarman

## Two Poems

### THE INSTANT

That the name flies out of her memory;  
That her forefinger extends and points and pivots  
like an antenna;  
That the signal to her body to move forward is lost  
among unravelling nerves;  
That no hope of ever satisfying the child who studies  
her appears in her eyes—a downcast veil, a dog's  
sorrow;  
That she knows with one more step she'll pitch forward  
and the falling may not stop;  
That all the past is present in her as it is in God,  
but without the present and the future, so that  
she understands the freakishness of saints;  
That she knows she's not a saint and knows her great  
joy will be the first drink of the day;  
That she recognizes her son's impatience, her daughter's,  
and yet—  
What was that name?  
The instant that she tries a name to name a grandchild  
and finds that she's correct;  
The fading of that instant and that name, the onset  
of the slippery murk where she will have to pick  
it out again.

### CALIFORNIA PASTORAL

T-shirted and wing-tipped, in banana slacks,  
Translucently revealing paisley shorts,  
To 6 o'clock evening Mass, freshly showered  
And rinsed of sea salt that had laced their necks,  
They came, having parked in our parking lot—  
The Catholic surfers, like sea gods in mufti.  
They pocketed their car keys, squinting, always  
Scanning the horizon. We watched and volleyed



The dull ball up and over the limp net.  
 And they looked down toward us and turned away.  
 All day they genuflected before steep water.  
 Or was it that the breakers knelt to them?  
 All day they licked the spindrift from their lips  
 And felt the sea-surge rise to end it all.  
 They made the crack-up of the glassy swells  
 Look purely beautiful, and came to have  
 The host placed on their tongues and turn to flesh.  
 And what was it we loved? Our image of them?  
 Or the bodies where our images were born?  
 But we were merely curious, as they were.  
 They strode along the crest of our parking lot,  
 Along the warm white sidewalk, past our church,  
 And entered theirs where candles welcomed them.

*Cecile Goding*

Two Poems

CONVERSATION WITH LYLA

"This work will break your gorgeous heart," I tell her.

Waste it, like the precious organ alone in dry ice  
 once discovered in a plane crash. There was a failure,  
 the contents shattered somewhere in our American

desert, and they had to start all over  
 searching for the right size heart. The donor card  
 I carry in my wallet will one day be forgotten, like the face  
 of my neighbor George. Whatever is salvaged—

the uncrushed kidney, one good eye, my delicate stirrup  
 bone—will vibrate to the surgeon's low request.  
 If I am still connected somehow, I might feel  
 fulfilled, the world all one piece, no horizon.

Lyla spends vacations chasing burros.

"The trick is, to get close enough  
 to rope them," she says, "then cut away tin cans  
 or tangled fishline. The deserts out here are dumps—  
 oil drums, car parts, cans punched out and thrown."

I picture the flash first, a dangling bracelet of brighter light  
 caught on earth and sky and burro, the world all one piece,  
 no horizon. Imagine, more than see, the scar of rusty blood.  
 The open-ended lard can works against the fetlock.

Count off. There is Lyla's gorgeous heart,  
 and the one in the frightened burro, held down  
 by oh-sooo-gentle hands—also this area that hurts  
 when I say to Lyla:

I have no idea where in God's green  
 United States George and his kids are.

Small things—a coat for the three-year-old, a ride to school,  
 water. Utilities cut? That was his fault. Sometimes I want  
 what it takes to toss your money away, to place your bet  
 on the board, one of those great overwrought metaphors

for life, which is after all—say it—short. Throw the dice,  
 and like it or not, carry water from the neighbor  
 for weeks.

And what did the man want with another  
 well-meaning white woman anyway?

Already had the food stamp clerk, case worker,  
 and state-appointed guardian checking up on  
 toothpaste. When what he is out there looking for  
 is peace, the kind you can bury your face in,

no horizon. "Lyla, like as not, that same burro is back  
 out there in the nearest dump with another rusty bangle,  
 maybe two." She says, "That's not the point, and if you can't  
 see what the point is, I'm getting off the phone."

"Lyla, listen:

Last week, I went over to George's, and his place is full  
 of some new tenant who's sold her food stamps to the crack

man, and her kids are starved." Already I love and hate her.

Fathers fly in, migrate out. So who's at fault here—  
her father? The System? Herself? *My* mother? Or me because I  
showed up,

hunting someone else. Lyla asks, "Then what?"

"What do you think? We got  
groceries."

Lyla says, "Take care," and I hang up,  
thinking, sentence fragment. Where's your object, kid?  
Maybe the problem will solve itself: more dumps,  
less desert, fewer burros each winter.

#### WATCHING BACKWARDS

"Be careful, young ladies," says Sister Suzanne.  
"Act up once more and you'll watch this one backwards."  
But I am new to the school so, curious,  
I jump up twice in my seat before I'm caught.

I thought Sister would be true to her word.  
She would press reverse and send Anne Frank  
with all her kin spinning back  
to their own lovely black and white flat  
in Amsterdam, Anne on a window seat bright  
with winter sun. She would trip backwards  
into a featherbed, wait for soothing darkness.  
Like us, she would pout, daydream,  
and soon we'd be back to her happy beginning.

Older, working  
in the projects, I pray for real  
power: Please, there are things  
I cannot accept.  
I want to stop a nice woman  
in the act of beating  
her girl. I want to hang up  
on the calm official voice

that says, "Let me make this easy"—what  
have I  
actually  
seen?  
Now I'm talking with the child  
who will never  
speak to me.  
She urinates in her chair,  
then waits to be hit.  
I'm tired. Let me take it from the top:  
each time she comes over,  
she gets smaller and smaller until—  
one day—she gets her wish. She  
reverses course, up the bloody  
birth canal, to be reabsorbed  
by the passionate body.  
End of story. Easy.

Here's what really happens, more than once:  
Sister marches me and my chair to the front,  
then turns me to face an audience of children  
who wisely ignore my fate. She throws the switch  
on Anne Frank and suddenly I'm miserable,  
staring right at the round white sun of the projector,  
its tunnel of blinding dust. Shading my eyes,  
there is nothing I can do but sit.

There is nothing I can do but try  
to piece together a story that might make sense.  
There are snatches of words and music above  
the clack-clack-clack of the machine. And—damn them—  
row after row of good, quiet children, expressions too easy  
to read. Light barely licks each frame.  
The story of a girl plays, inevitably, on.

*Martha McFerren*

KNEES AND NECKS/NEW ORLEANS

I was getting my shoulder  
jerked back in place when  
DeLancie brought Dr. Jess  
that nice new book on Medjugorge.  
He isn't going again,  
not while they're making Yugoslavia  
back into Bosnia  
and Serbia and Montenegro  
and Croatia and Slovenia.  
If you look up now,  
you don't see the Virgin,  
you see a helicopter.

He's going to Guadalupe.  
And Dr. Jess said,  
"DeLancie, I'm begging you,  
don't go down to Guadalupe  
and mortify your knees.  
Look at Miss Mae Marie's cousin—  
six months of agony  
with a nephew on either side  
hauling her up and down until  
I got those two knees fixed,  
and, first thing, what does she do?  
Takes herself to Guadalupe  
and sees those brown old Indians  
crawling around the pavement,  
and down she crashes into this  
fit of Mexican religion.  
I told her, 'I certainly hope  
you got what you prayed for,'  
and she said, 'Dr. Jess,  
I hurt so bad I  
forgot about praying.'  
DeLancie, I saw those kneecaps,

and they were blue and purple  
like one of those dab painters  
had gotten cute on them."

Despite this flawless expostulation,  
I could tell, just standing there,  
two fat little candles  
had lit themselves  
behind DeLancie's eyeballs,  
and he had every intention  
of packing himself some khaki shorts  
and heading on down to Mexico  
to fling out both his kneecaps  
for a little ecstasy.

Even if you don't go thump  
in front of revelation,  
embarrassing your friends and  
frightening the chiropractors,  
the older you get,  
it looks like you're going to have  
a lot of those little  
calcium epiphanies  
in the third and fifth lumbar  
or maybe the seventh cervical.  
The Big O, roller coasters,  
or some idiotic football team  
scoring a touchdown—  
what's the point  
if you can't fling back your  
head and howl?

That happened to you yet?



AND AFTERWARDS, THE LONGING

The odor of raspberry mingling with honeysuckle,  
beating through the long heat of a June afternoon  
on the veranda, where we lay flushed from playing tag  
in the orchard, too lazy to lift the cushions  
to the glider or untangle the hammock, chips of gray  
paint sticking to our arms and legs, the whole summer  
with nothing to do shimmering there before us—

And I'd go back, I'd be that fat flushed girl again  
if it weren't that it's taken all these years  
to smell raspberries or honeysuckle sweet with sun  
and not tremble with longing, not feel my heart  
sicken with longing until I have to reach out  
to steady myself on whatever wire or rail  
the bush spills over, the way I've trembled  
and sickened for love, a woman otherwise capable

trembling and sickening for love, for his hands,  
for his tongue, the blood-rush, the murmuring—  
and the good chair or bed no comfort, the life,  
the books, the music, all nothing against this  
longing for the beloved to still love, as if love  
were all of it, the odors mingling, the blood beating  
with what's to come, with knowing there's no stopping it—

And afterwards, the longing—

THE PASSION OF DOCTOR DIXIE

Consider the sad Lepidopterist leaping after butterflies  
with his net and his nose for a whiff  
of passing Swallowtail, the sweetbriar siren  
of Clouded Yellow. Not for him the great field

of rolling and holding, the dull weight of flesh, huge  
hot breath of human crooning loud and ungraceful.  
He hears the whip of wings against breeze  
and sets his net to the chase.  
Oh, the fragrance!

The scent sets itself apart from any flower—  
seduction tool, little male love gun;  
in *Fritallaries*, aphrodite and atlantis,  
it's delicate chocolate, vanilla wafer airs.

Secret odors the doctor must discover  
rubbing a finger down the tufted abdomen  
or barely brushing a lower wing and pressing his finger  
to his nose he goes away, then, just for an instant.

Oh, some smell of kitchen sink and cabbage water,  
and some betray a taste for rot and excrement,  
exhaling softly in his face, pressed close  
against his pinned-down paramour.

And once he caught a whiff like pig sties,  
he could not believe anything so small could smell so much.  
But a man can forgive a butterfly its secret passions,  
its tremoring energies stinking only for love.

## ORNITHOLOGY LESSON

It's an act of desperation,  
the rare mating ritual  
of the bald eagle pairs.

They come together mid-air between  
mountains, you can barely make  
them out, you with your Audubon

binoculars, you in your birding  
hat. The two of them bound beak  
and feather, claw and wing,

having taken leave of every other  
instinct, like survival, like hunger,  
when they caught that scent floating

in the thin air. Mostly what they  
have forgotten is how to breathe, how  
to fly. They drop their wings,

admit to the full weight of themselves  
washed clean of the serendipitous  
magic of every day bald eagle flight

by the thick true wash of lust—  
which brings every creature right down  
out of the wild kingdom into his own

common, humble denominator. Aren't you glad,  
bird watchers, you're not a part  
of that? Those eagles risk it all

for the free fall down the long swallow  
of sex, speeding down the chimney of air,  
plummeting blindly toward earth, unaware,

entranced, careening toward your keen  
eyes riveted on the speeding bundle,

and just when you know this must

be a suicide pact, no birdheart promise,  
but the real thing among the noble breed,  
just before they hit the earth and scatter

like burst pillows—they disengage slow  
motion in a stunning, artful gesture.  
And there you are, binoculars around

your ankles, as the eagles pick up  
the next breeze, feathering, feathering, and soar.

## THE LADIES OF THE CLUB

If it's no good, your friends are dying all  
over the place. If it's no good, you can't lift  
your bones to sweep the floor, if grief grips  
your gut so hard you can't mash down one more spoon  
full of what might sustain you, better go on down

to the club. Pull up a chair, lay it out for the ladies  
where they play cards and smoke until dawn.  
Lay it out for Ollie hovering near the ceiling,  
dentures clicking, face twitching, and Edith perpetually  
doing the dishes, how else, she says, will things  
get done? And Anna with her headset tuned  
into Gospel—wafted in a cloud of violet perfume,  
Myrtle's serving the sherry and Alice  
dries her mortician fingers to get a better grip.

The motto here is "Hedge your bets."  
The motto here is "It All Comes Out  
in the Wash." Nobody waters the creeping  
Jesus vine with gratuitous tears,  
nobody blames you for breaking down  
as long as you can play out your hand.  
Nobody tells you it will be better  
in the morning, they just  
cut you in on the deal and keep on playing.

## About Our Contributors

JUNE FRANKLAND BAKER lives in Richland, Washington.

SUZANNE CLEARY lives in Nyack, New York.

PHILIP DACEY teaches at Southwest State University in Marshall, Minnesota. He and his two sons have formed the performance trio Strong Measures.

ALLISON FUNK teaches at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville. Her *Forms of Conversion* was published by Alice James Books in 1986.

JODY GLADDING lives in East Calais, Vermont.

CECILE GODING is a literacy teacher in Florence, South Carolina. Her chapbook, *The Women Who Drink at the Sea*, has just been published by State Street Press.

LOWELL JAEGER's most recent book is *Hope Against Hope* (University of Utah Press, 1990). He lives in Bigfork, Montana.

MARK JARMAN is currently a Guggenheim Fellow and last year was co-winner of The Poets' Prize. He lives in Nashville.

LYNNE KNIGHT lives in Berkeley, California.

JOHN LINDGREN lives in Santa Cruz, California.

PETER MANDEL lives in Paris. Last year Harper & Row published his nonfiction book, *The Official Cat I.Q. Test*.

MARTHA MCFERREN has published three books of poems, most recently *Contours for Ritual* (Louisiana State University Press). She lives in New Orleans.

WILLIAM OLSEN teaches at Western Michigan University. His first book, *The Hand of God and a Few Bright Flowers*, (University of Illinois Press, 1988), was a National Poetry Series winner.

STEVEN REESE teaches at Youngstown State University in Ohio.

SHERRY RIND lives in Redmond, Washington. Her *The Hawk in the Back* was published by Anhinga Press in 1985.

MOLLY TENENBAUM lives in Seattle.

ROD TULLIS lives between Marv's Bar and Bertha's Cafe in Edinburgh, Indiana.

MONA VAN DUYN won the 1991 Pulitzer Prize for her book *Near Changes* (Knopf). *Firefall* will be published by Knopf next year. She lives in St. Louis.

JAN WALLACE is a graduate student in the University of Washington MFA Program.

TOM WAYMAN lives in Winlaw, B.C. His most recent book is *Paperwork*, an anthology of U.S. and Canadian poems about daily employment. He teaches at the Kootenay School of the Arts.

## Poetry Northwest Prize Awards, 1992

HELEN BULLIS PRIZE: \$100

John Woods for Five Poems (Spring 1991) and  
John Engman for Three Poems (Autumn 1991)

THEODORE ROETHKE PRIZE: \$50

Gloria Boyer for Three Poems (Summer 1991)

RICHARD HUGO PRIZE: \$50

Mark Kraushaar for Two Poems (Summer 1991)

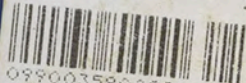
CAROLYN KIZER PRIZE: \$50

Jan Wallace for Two Poems (Autumn 1991)



POETRY NWJ

\$3.00



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