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# Poetry

NORTHWEST



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# POETRY NORTHWEST

VOLUME THIRTY-SIX

NUMBER TWO

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# POETRY NORTHWEST

SUMMER 1995

## *Kimberly Swayze*

Three Poems

### MUST

It's still dark when I open the store. The key sticks  
in the lock, the latch gives without grace. I go inside,  
but I'm not sure.

I'm not sure where I keep things, can't find switches,  
have forgotten what I stock. Small feet scuttle ahead  
of me and there's a smell of must.

In the back, I count out money. My employees, whoever  
they were, have gone away. I lay twenty dollars  
in a metal tray, sprinkle quarters, close the drawer.  
I think it's enough.

There is enough for one day. I walk down the aisles. There's  
nothing  
I want. There must be more to this than merchandise,  
I think, but that's more than I can carry.

I can see the dirty moon through the plate glass. It wants  
shining. I decide to go home.

When I go, I go abruptly through the double doors, letting them  
swing. I've been an unloved customer. I am tired. I have  
spent everything.

### Are You Moving?

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of POETRY NORTHWEST, be sure to notify this office in advance.  
Send both your old address and new—and the ZIP Code numbers.

I walk through the streets under the big moon's disappearance,  
under big trees that arch over the street. Things must take care  
of themselves.

Strangers will come to cart it away, a spool at a time, furtive  
at first as they take what they must.  
This must be the way I have always  
kept store.

It's time I was on my way home. Behind me, the store blazes  
bright as a pleasure boat. It won't close up. It has  
to satisfy. I have to learn how to forget it again, let it burn  
out like a light.

#### DAMAGE

The man in the Burberry coat won't need  
to be told how the cat was eighteen, stone  
deaf. It won't make any difference  
when the vet explains the bad heart: how  
the light tap from the back tire could  
as easily have been a bluejay's swoop  
past the back screen door. Nor  
will facts change if his daughter, a nurse  
on a children's oncology ward, reminds him  
how long some things live without  
trying, without giving themselves a second  
thought. The man, who's old enough himself  
to have heard it all before, sitting  
on the pavement at six a.m. with the dead  
cat in his lap (the engine idling away,  
the driver's door chiming), won't need  
to rehearse how no one's to blame, how swift  
death is held to be painless, how accidents  
happen. The daughter, the nurse, will try  
to stay quiet. In the end, the nurse will not hold  
back anything: how a man who buries  
a cat in a garden doesn't stop to change

his clothes. How the cuffs of his slacks  
soak up dew. How his briefcase rests  
for a time against the sundial, how,  
walking back across the patio, he stomps  
loose earth from his shoes, returns to the idling  
car, retrieves his keys. And then?  
But the rest of his story's not ready to begin.  
Her words will need a day or two,  
and some place else, to form, and here,  
in this first hour of Louisiana  
daylight (the usual damp slant of sun  
flattening the broad blades of Saint  
Augustine grass, the usual neighbors  
leaving for work and the news landing flat  
on the usual porches) there's a shovel  
still to be borrowed, there's a hole  
that needs digging by a row of dusty zinnias,  
and there isn't one plausible agent  
in sight: no one thing capable of suspending  
its own animation but a man who simply goes on  
sitting crosslegged in the driveway,  
thinking, if this is possible, of nothing  
at all (his lap nested with soft, pale  
hairs), until someone's sent outside  
to make him move because he, too, might need  
to be nudged into going where he was slated  
to go anyway, blinking, unable  
to articulate why he'll be late,  
or why saying so won't be enough.

#### EXTANT FIGURE

Believe me or not,  
this would have happened  
like this: snow flowered  
thick on the stalks,  
flocked the brittle  
brooms of queen  
anne's lace until  
your brain was what

bloomed, balmy  
as an august night,  
and you followed the plough,  
waded half bare

into an ice field (never mind  
how color gets ashed  
out of asters), and,  
standing there, knee  
deep in the baling light  
of the moon, perhaps  
you straddled drifts, bones  
insentient to cold,  
the better to gather  
what you were sure  
should be there:  
marionberries, blue  
skinned damsons, no

surprises for you  
in your plum frost, plant  
rust, mushroom wrung  
from the sponge  
of a memory cell; who am I  
to say? maybe even  
now your ankles melt  
bowls for the snow  
drops, maybe you prepare  
the coming of what-have-you  
flowers, and,  
at the risk of repeating  
myself, believe me

or not, you see yourself  
too, overexposed,  
just beginning to freeze:  
rose cheeked, slow  
limbed, ice in the crease  
at the back of your knees;  
a dangerous notion —

even so, you don't care,  
never did, snow daubing  
your eyelids, filling  
your hair: we've read  
enough to agree  
on what wasn't

the figure for pain,  
light as the snow  
that never floated  
like petals, as petals  
that never lay like  
snow, and now all lies  
still — cold flowers  
consequential  
to some trespass through  
semantic fields, not

on account of any  
certain possibility;  
it's possible  
by now you've gone  
away and left me  
here, talking to myself,  
and it's possible  
you've never even seen  
a stem of queen anne's  
lace dried back  
to a fragile star;

still, if you're going  
to stay here and insist  
that we keep up  
this fiction, then  
we'll have to dispose  
of the moon: never itself  
strictly a figment,  
and call it what  
you will, it's no more  
round and full tonight

than you have to admit  
it is, suggesting

whatever it does suggest  
if we're determined  
to stand around half  
dressed in the blue  
furrows of a frozen  
field and claim  
it's rising, though you know  
as well as I do  
that it wasn't going  
anywhere: it was always  
only the two of us,  
the first and second  
persons, two figures  
almost perceptibly  
falling away.

*Len Roberts*

## Two Poems

## ANGELS IN THE EXPERIMENTAL CATECHISM/MATH CLASS

I could feel God slowing down, turning  
from pure  
thought to light and finally to matter  
scarred  
as my heart-filled desk, what was left  
of Him  
filtering through the Seraphim, Cherubim,  
the Thrones  
and then through the second order, the third,  
where my guardian angel kept his wings  
on my either side,  
tried to stop me from staring at Karen  
Awlen's tanned  
leg tucked under the gray plaid skirt,  
tried to hold back my hand from Donna's  
gold hair  
streaming across my desk each time she  
leaned back her head,  
my breath steaming the air by the window  
where leaves  
turned orange, yellow, red,  
and the high school girls swayed in circles  
on the sidewalk,  
one laughing, another tucking in her blouse,  
all of me gone till  
Sister Ann Zita tapped my desk with the heavy  
pointer, called me back  
to the flash cards of 7 x 11, 230 x 10, re-  
minded us all  
that numbers could prove the existence of God,  
that two angels hovered that very second  
around each of  
our unholy heads, that they could see into  
our quartered, blackened hearts,

her soft voice whispering five of us would  
not live to be thirty,  
making me turn around to guess Jackie Foster, Al  
Aldon and Donald Wilcox,  
maybe Jimmy Charette and Alfred Bouchard,  
and I raised my hand to ask the odds of all of us  
going to Hell,  
counting the whacks as I leaned over Sister's  
desk,  
counting the notes that rose from my corduroy  
paints,  
the kind with yellow and pink and brilliant  
green specks  
that glittered like stars even as Sister  
whacked,  
bead rattling, black-winged, beneath  
the loudly ticking clock.

#### LAST NIGHT, BETWEEN DUSK AND

dark,  
I walked the upper fields  
trying  
to see how well I could tell  
obstacles  
in the black, the way I used  
to do  
when I was a child back on  
Olmstead  
Street and would sneak up  
Big John's Hill  
as soon as their voices  
started  
to rise, when her lips  
began  
to quiver, when he piled  
the stacks  
of coins into the leather  
purse

and gulped the Schaefer's.  
By then  
I was well into what I  
thought  
was a forest of birch,  
scrub  
oak, poison sumac I  
would  
rub my hands across  
to feel  
the soft fuzz, remem-  
bering  
my crazy Mohawk grand-  
father's  
warning that the sumac's  
clumped  
balls of poison would  
run  
madly in the veins of  
who-  
ever dared to touch  
it  
in the dark, my eyes  
searching  
the sky for a hint  
of gray,  
no reprieve for me,  
I knew  
even at seven, when  
I grasped  
the slender trunks  
and  
began to sway.

*Shannon Borg*

UNDER THE CITY, UNDER THE SEA

He's standing next to me before the train  
goes dark—a man covered with blue tattoos;  
dolphins and seaweed curling over his skin  
toward two rough starfish on the backs of his hands.

I'd forgotten how this tunnel rumbles through  
the dead flesh of the earth, the bay above,  
burrowing under the city, under the sea—  
a swirling world of old tires and tattered

wreckage of sailboats beneath the ocean's skin.  
I'd forgotten that other tattoo, a vine winding over  
your shoulder as if it carried your blood, or traced  
a hidden river of grief, back to your heart.

I press a cold hand against the colder window,  
and squint to see into a vast eclipse—  
a dim past where we reached out as divers would,  
our mouths mouthing a muted language, blind

to hazards around us, but sensitive as sharks,  
knowing we'd drown if we didn't keep moving.  
As the lights flash and dim I see the man's blue hand;  
your memory ripples away, taken by waves, leaving

no scar on the water. But somewhere below, your voice  
calls, beyond the dark sea of my body. The train slows.  
I take my hand from the window, leaving a mark  
on the sweating glass, and I wait for the door to open.

*Catherine Coan*

HOW WE SLEEP

i.  
Backlit, enlarged two times,  
the x-ray of our cat doesn't show  
why he trembles, won't walk.

The bones are straight and placed  
right, even the feet — poised  
to plant. Pinched nerve,

wagers the doctor, or blood clot.  
Ten days of one medicine. No  
change, ten days of another.

ii.  
On our couch, we hold the film up to failing sun through  
the window, then lamplight, then against the white cushions.  
*So small*, you say, tracing the vertebrae, or the blur of organs  
beneath, tracing around the subject curled near the radiator —  
a misplaced sweater, tossed coat, could lose him completely.

His legs want to disappear — they move into his belly,  
shortening slowly. Having no children, we think a child  
would be no different. On the beach in Ozette we collected  
green pebbles, a twisted fir cone, photographed the neat spiral  
bloom of skunk cabbage. Relics we keep on the mantel

to call the larger places here. Do you remember the moss  
dragging from bridge to river in the rain forest, the trail  
backed up with prehistoric mud? Do you remember  
returning to the cabin, and the new weight of every known  
contour — nipple, lip, hair, and knee? The trout we ate with lemon

that night, poached in dill and water — how her spine  
must have set on swinging towards bottom, then hooked shock,  
gaping, her whole length tethered. And alongside, artichokes,



a debacle of flesh and butter, skinned scale by scale to each hairy stomach — always we come to the bones of things.

iii.

Tonight, as our heads  
fill with hay,  
easy coax and spur,  
sleep lopes to us  
on liquid flanks,  
all limpid eye  
and lulling nuzzle.  
The planets, I trust,  
are making familiar  
arcs through the night.  
Moonlight, or fluorescence  
from the complex  
next door, soaks  
through the curtains, sees  
through our skins  
to what we might dream.  
The room is dark,  
and beneath the sheets  
there is a glow  
from our bodies —  
skin and tail and  
whisker and fist —  
more than heat,  
it casts no light  
on ceiling or walls.  
One more night  
I keep watch.  
One more night  
we've been passed over.

iv.

The sky slides quiet into morning.  
The pigeons rattle in the eaves.

And the world wakes up fragile, almost transparent.  
And the last ghosts of night are four-legged ghosts,

running in rhythms their bodies remember,  
running for shadow of porch step and shed.

How our cat stills to a pulse in the quilt, dearest —  
how death candles our animal shells.

*D. Nurkse*

Two Poems

THESE ARE YOUR RIGHTS

The counterdemonstrators were waiting  
at the bottom of the street  
and their poverty shocked us.  
Bricks in paper bags,  
bats, hoarse voices shouting,  
*faggots, these streets are ours.*  
The space between our ranks  
and theirs seemed living,  
a strip of noon where dust  
and blowing wrappers  
were imbued with will.  
They stared there too,  
not meeting our eyes,  
as if reading a signal  
in that narrowing gap.  
We began to sing,  
they found a chant,  
we struggled to hear their words  
under our harmony,  
the distance between us  
no bigger than a body.  
They spat and some of us  
who sang swallowed that spit.  
They parted, we kept marching,  
they were an audience,  
as they faded behind us

we could piece together words:  
*assholes, these streets are ours.*  
Then we turned into the green suburb,  
the boulevard of carved maples,  
dwarfs with chipped lamps  
painted white, and there  
the line of squad cars  
parked slantwise was waiting,  
the visor raised a bullhorn  
into its shadow and the voice  
—pure metal—articulated:  
*These Are Your Rights.*

#### AT FULTON MALL

A woman tried to leave  
without paying and Security  
is trying to determine  
the value of her meal.  
Did she have the Surfburger?  
With fries? With fried onions?  
Tomato is extra.  
Tartar sauce comes with it.  
He asks the Deputy beside her  
who relays the questions.  
They're both old men  
in color coded blazers  
but Security has a palm tree  
airbrushed on his tie.  
He leans over the menu  
and clicks a calculator.  
He might be adding  
the years I spent with you.  
The Deputy makes small talk  
in the many silences.  
How about those Rams?  
Dolphins? Vikings? Raiders?  
The woman glances behind her  
toward the street where a clock

must show how late she is.  
To me, she looks like you  
but gray with fatigue,  
a house dress, a purse  
that knocks against her knees.  
The door is bright with snow  
and a crowd passes there,  
entering and leaving, each  
giving her one quick glance.  
When they see the handcuffs  
they know as much as I.  
At the far end of the counter  
the waitress coaxes catsup  
from an empty bottle to a full,  
wincing at the time it takes.  
Once I leave I notice:  
my hand in my pocket  
is counting change mechanically.  
I realize there was a radio  
playing all that time  
and a soft voice singing,  
*each night I cry my eyes out  
remembering the love we shared.*

CLAUSEWITZ'S MAIL

An aide found her in a shop in Berlin.

The offer was five marks per letter,  
two letters per week. She had to be  
"scornful of politics and indifferent  
to God. Tell her to press hard  
so I can touch what I read."

They would never  
knowingly meet. The money, warmed

by the aide's hand, persuaded her to agree.

That night she stared an hour at a page  
before mailing it off blank. Next  
she described a man smoking in an arcade,  
though there'd been no man, no arcade.

"Tall," she wrote, "his torso hooked,  
who paced

as if waiting for reprieve,

relief from debt or a bad affair.

I expected him to speak to the air."  
These and the next two he left unopened,  
stacked on his desk under a stone  
lifted from Waterloo. The fifth he read  
straight off. "Raid is a conversation.  
I've tried

to measure the intention,

the mood of strangers by the character  
of their stride. Yesterday a man asked  
for a bar of soap which smells  
'like Istanbul.' I watched a beetle  
caught in a web being eaten from inside."  
This one he carried to the Ministry of War  
and read

three times during a conference,

enjoying most the line, "Men are smallest  
when they believe themselves responsible  
for the horizon." She liked being able  
to say anything and so began describing him  
to himself. "You enjoy the second but not  
the third glass of wine. Under  
certain trees

in the shade of spring you believe

you hear your mother describe

what the purpose of her shadow is.

Though your left leg's shorter  
than your right, you've trained yourself  
not to limp." But after two years her last  
letter came. "You're assigned  
every face

which appears in my dreams.

It's as if I've wed silence.

I've decided you're a gentle man. Do not  
find me, do not prove me wrong."  
Clausewitz burned the letters in an east-  
facing room. The cooled ashes he collected  
in a tin box, a box he kept by his bed  
and touched

at night before darkness screamed.

SUPERSTITION

A broken yoke's three days rain. Wisteria on the floor  
and the bride  
won't show. Missed belt loops initiate dissolution, loss  
of fortune,  
bundling of pain. A cat in different contexts charms  
or curses.

A robin in the nave's a fat-time flare, emblem of health  
and profit,  
though if one strays in a winze miners thrash out,  
apprehending  
collapse, the living grave. Meaning clings to breath

and follicle,  
even tea leaves educate. The hand's wombed fissures,  
our jigsawing  
of clouds and stars, hold the cunning day accountable,  
sugget when best  
to taunt and dance, when duck and tremble, mouths sewn,  
heads shawled.  
At ten I believed the legless nuns that raised hands  
arrowed words  
upward, assuring my mumbles would be distantly heard.  
So nights  
I blessed names, parents and friends, dogs and presidents  
in turn, asked  
the ceiling's spackled swirls to keep their heretical flesh  
intact. This habit  
begun, obsession followed: I couldn't sleep if I'd left  
the listing undone,  
a punk-god, codirector of consequence. Then Joseph  
Bonafiglio, seeking  
a midwestern ocean, climbed a silo and fell in,  
got hashed  
by the tempered blades of a fan, leaving his parents  
a bodiless grief.  
My fault, I thought, and gave up prayer, later God whom I'd  
mistrusted anyway,  
eavesdropper, snoop, Big Brother with all the keys. Yet  
I'll still speak  
the names of those I love as if the act protects, mediates  
the random parceling  
of woe and sludge, keeps them happy, sober, in line for the big  
promotion. Thistle root  
cures toothaches. Rubbing a hand over the head of a bald man  
brings the past back,  
the picture technicolor clear. Prayer, mojos, a chicken  
nailed to the wall:  
like Jesus, sacrificed by the meek; like us, dead after all.

## *Nancy Kubl*

### IN THE ARBOR

In a room filled with heavy wooden furniture, people hold  
tightly to chairs, winding banisters, the fixed mantel.  
Their knuckles whiten. They are afraid  
they might rise, fly, dissolve into solid air. Everywhere  
voices, the sound of glasses touching. You, my friend  
among strangers,  
whisper from behind me. Your voice among glass voices  
is wind across the river, wind moving across the Navesink.

Dolphins once followed a school of fish from the Atlantic  
to the bay and into the mouth of that shallow river.  
All summer they jumped in the small wake off the bow  
of my sailboat. The river spoke to them  
and they wouldn't leave, even when fall came,  
and winter. Even when water froze around them.  
They stayed though their smooth skin became colorless  
with cold, scraped where ice had broken against it.

I walk out into the night to find you among vines,  
the smell of trees and fruit. The voices replaced  
with night quiet and my footsteps. Light falls  
across my narrow shoulders, casting my shadow  
before me. I follow it into the arbor.

Finding you here under this canopy  
of leaves and night might be like finding  
the trapdoor a beautiful woman disappears into  
or finding a sudden answer to the question  
I never asked the night we met alone. Away from friends  
who circled a fire at the edge of the river,  
you kissed me, smiled when I blushed, surprised.  
You are magic tonight, you said. I wanted to taste it.

I want to tell you that the dolphins simply disappeared  
from the river. An old fisherman said he saw them

swimming south in the ocean, but I knew they were dead.  
The river had eaten them because they were magic.

Winding through vines, my hands begin to dissolve,  
the bones melt into flesh and out of it  
into night air. I want to show them to you,  
to ask if you hear the river. Night makes the grapes  
of the arbor black, they brush against me, break  
from vines, fall to my feet. Without finding you,  
without returning to the heavy room, I rise—  
from dark woods, on wind, on water or a voice.

I am going home to the Navesink to follow my hands.  
I am going to dissolve wholly beside that river  
where once a dolphin burst through water and I saw  
colors no one else has ever seen. I rise  
like bits of ash that once circled fire.

*Margaret Weaver*

Two Poems

#### ESCAPES

When my pillow exploded, feathers everywhere,  
I remembered the gossips whose rumors  
belied their townfolk. Punishment was  
to catch feathers let go on a windy hilltop  
and stuff them all back into sacks.

Tight seams, strong stitches, may break.  
They hold back legends when they're new,  
hide the small secrets of pillow talk.  
Single words leak out, then everything  
floods over streets and neighborhoods.

I can make do with what I have, catch  
a few bits of down and feathers, carry  
the mess to the pillowman who will

take it under his wing and confine it  
in blue-striped ticking, good as new.

I can throw it all up in the air to float  
with dandelion and cottonwood puffs.  
Birds will weave feathers into their nests,  
dog fur, grass trimmings, hemlock fronds.  
The hell with it. Let the birds have it.

I scatter feathers all over the garden,  
let each one make a new life for itself  
like a drop of water escaped from a dam,  
like a word escaped, good or bad,  
doing harm or not, as best it can.

#### THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT

In Solomon's courtyard, stamping its feet  
at its wife, a single butterfly set off  
a swirl of weather systems, creating  
rainstorms in Nineveh, drought in Ophir,  
nudging the distant icefields out to sea.

Air is inverted still from that sleepy night  
when a Chinese sage dreamed he was a butterfly  
dreaming it was a Chinese philosopher.  
Monarchs float in orange sunsets over mountains,  
over the oceans, seed waves of transient color.

Two tiger swallowtails hesitate  
over my garden. The kerria trembles  
with bloom, its tangled chaos yellower.  
Each petal charges the air, registers  
a slight tremor on some complex scale  
changing the weather and the future, somehow.

*Don Russ*

THE CICADAS AT THE LAKE

Daylight dies, and in porch light  
the screens solidify against the night.  
In the stillness someone rattles  
an unfilled glass.

I stand up. I say nothing,  
but I can hear the sound now, thousands  
of them in one sound.  
It isn't loud.

Inside, the lamplight  
shines down. At dinner we look around,  
and our eyes are like caves of night.  
Someone says it sounds

like breathing. I  
had hoped that I alone would know,  
that I alone would have to know and know  
and know. In my dark bed

I hear it, breathing. It's like  
my breathing, everywhere and loud.  
I hear it near and far away.  
I try to see

into the dark outside  
my head. I try to see what isn't  
me. I don't know what's me.  
I only know.

*Hayley R. Mitchell*

RAIN

This summer I take twenty kids, young poets with pencils  
as sharp as hope in their pockets, to see  
an African storyteller, a musician, on campus.

He shows us instruments we've never seen,  
whose vibrations shake the stiff academic halls.  
He bids us push the tables aside, stand,  
stomp our feet, slap hands and thighs and hips  
with one, two, four partners, raise our white middle-class voices  
and sing a Ugandi children's song.

There is only one girl, one long blonde braid and thick glasses,  
who will not participate, who looks at me as if I, her teacher,  
should know better. She does not latch on, like I do, to the  
lilting words  
of the storyteller, this stranger who tells me that in Africa  
the dead are not dead, they just go away.

I shake the gourd rattles, and in my shaking,  
she does not see I speak to you. The classroom  
fills with the rhythm of rain, but she does not dance in it  
as I do, does not understand my tears.  
She will not let down that thick braid when her family,  
all she knows, is safe at home.

She does not need this fake rain, but I use it,  
open my mouth, even, the catch the drops;  
use it to remember Winter Break spent under your umbrella,  
your covers; I recall your car, the wipers squeaking  
as you drove to school with one hand on my knee;

I use it, like the shekere in Africa, to speak with the dead,  
and to awaken here, this little girl no longer living.

## GOPHERS

The problem was the emptiness, the unplanted garden,  
and to fill it we plowed the hard earth  
with a Roto-tiller, a machine that churned  
dirt. I had to drag all my weight  
to turn it. Day was still, time unmoving,  
and we were afraid of happiness, the gold sky,  
the stiff milkweed at the fence.

The struggling was a journey, and the return  
left the traveler gray—the homecoming, the departure,  
crust powdered. Tomorrow the peat,  
the seeding, the tiny green never there,  
only the steer manure so dark under the hose  
you could smell it down the street.

A dog had to romp and we had to soothe the tears,  
and then the sky left the space stand still again:  
the sky that did nothing but empty every noon  
with clouds, the coastal silt that never rained,  
the sun that lay all over the fields  
and the concrete: then the follicles would come,  
the answer to the heat. The plain chalk powder  
breathing across the sidewalk, the salts in the earth  
sweating, home was the gun-crack  
settling of the slab floor.

If the ocean were closer, but it was only  
a taste in the air. And rust.  
The garden pipe in the plowed loam blistered,  
dust caking girders, car tarps gray  
and imprinted, Harley handlebars,  
Olds humped backs, the sweep of fog  
some nights never touching lips, the sky  
down almost all the way but here.

As though I made a list of lies and circled the ones  
that were most untrue. As if when we pressed the putty  
around the new windows we knew we were leaving  
something for the homicide ident-a-kit,  
clay=scar=the coughed-up soil  
around the gopher holes, the way out.

## HOMEWORK

The vacant lots were plowlines baked flat, and wild radish,  
yellow bean pods, huge brown tumbleweeds.  
There was so much left over from a war  
or a city that started and went nowhere,  
the glitter of the old glass factory, fill dirt,  
mounds bike-rutted, impregnated with chunks  
and porcelain, wire mesh, white plastic fittings.  
We did our homework first.  
Paths flung crooked, stakes with aged day-glo ribbon.  
There was writing on the sidewalks, the concrete

cracked, gray weeds, scribbles  
for the electricity crews, the telephone poles down,  
all of it underground, the hydrant hidden by foxtails,  
the *notice to destroy weeds* sign among  
the feral geranium. If we were sick we brought  
a note. Something was finished,  
done the way morning is,  
open to question, the heat

charged with the cool from the ocean,  
and even when we got our clothes  
off among the bamboo it was  
hot, the river sand all the way  
down to the harbor junked  
with cars the flood left rolled,  
burst steel-belteds. Getting good grades,  
home in time to boot the flight simulator and smoke  
just a little more of the future, the code book,  
the music club's monthly offering, dead air.

## WIND

There are mornings I have forgotten,  
evenings I do not want back,  
would not recognize as my own,  
late-night television, hurried snacks.  
A jacket stretches flat,

empty arms across a chain-link fence.  
A gull goes nowhere in the wind,  
its dark eye a mole on the white  
skin of an arm.

The empty jacket stays  
against the fence.  
When a sandwich wrapper tosses  
across the concrete and flattens  
beside the jacket where, if it  
were a person a hand would be,  
the world is made.

The empty place wrinkles,  
puddles skimmed flat and vanishing. See this,  
the heart says. This is where you live.  
If I had to make it all up all over again  
out of nothing, I couldn't.

I would hurry out into the emptiness  
and say here some trees and here some gulls  
and here wind and what I forgot would still  
be there, holding it in place.

## Kevin Stein

### BROKEN PINES

*Susurrus* is a word I've had to learn  
the hard way, as when fact insinuates  
meaning through boughs of pines I climbed

ten years ago, all of them now wind-raked  
and fallen, broken above the waist like those  
spindly women who roam the nursing home

where my mother bakes cake and pies and cookies.  
She dresses in white. She wears a beaded hair net.  
Some nights, I'll lug the basket of treats

from hall to darkened hall, so she can hug  
the beagle-faced boy, the girl with pretzeled  
limbs, all the pale-eyed residents of God's

waiting room who laugh and squeal and wheeze  
in my mother's skinny arms. For this,  
she makes four dollars an hour. Cherry pies

and pumpkin cupcakes, gingerbread men with  
cinnamon eyes, these scent the place —  
as do urine and vomit, the mix as fragrant

as the breath of the soon-gone who motions  
your ear down close and rasps, "It's time."  
If this were rock 'n roll, now would come

the blessed hush of thunderous drums,  
the splash and shoosh of cymbals,  
maybe a guitar's icy tinkling — segue

to some personal exposition sure to make  
cash enough to soothe anyone's black leather  
despair. But it's only this furious promise



of rain lashing white pine, my uncle  
asking for Basie or Ellington, something  
with swing to it, though he can't dance,

his body made jello by muscular dystrophy,  
as were his father, his brother, his third son.  
I bend to empty the bed pan. He whispers

in my blue ear, bruised and hideous  
from a southside pick-up game, warning  
my mother's a carrier, I could be next.

Sure, what passes on I've absorbed  
from her like music during sleep.  
*Sure, I ought to say, those are the odds,*

though I say nothing. Not because I'm brave  
or angry or too guilty to speak.  
Not because I model self-restraint.

Just because it's her I'm thinking of,  
how she tends the flushed and wilted  
with brushed velvet compassion —

that word meaning to bless another body  
as if it were your soul. Because  
I'm wrong. It's her song not his,

rising above Basie's "Oh, Lady Be Good,"  
its chorus plush with scotch pines  
and wheel-chaired children, all whisper and sigh.

*Dina Ben-Lev*

Two Poems

LETTER TO MY UNMET MOTHER

If the embroidery of this dream wears down,  
if my syntax unstitches, if I slouch, blankly

watching the window, the highest buds  
whitely swaying. If spring's dumbfoundingly

bright through the screen, if I breathe in to my depths  
but exhale hours I'd hoped to meet you.

If I breeze over the ellipses of my beginnings,  
if twenty-some years of blurry

ideas about why you relinquished me  
can't change my case sealed in steel

in upstate New York. If my file names a man  
whose machismo swung his sight south

away from the women he wooed. Maybe  
it mentions injurious jokes, a sky blue skirt

too high on your thighs. Maybe it notes  
a savvy acceptance of loss

or the circles, the gray under your eyes.  
Mary carried the Lord, but couldn't save him;

Moses cried in the bulrushes, yet parted the sea.  
And me, I've counted our country's star-spangled lies,

and still felt lucky to live here, where hope stretches  
such ludicrous lengths. A friend with AIDS shoots shark

cartilage into his veins. Another, not quite  
free of Sara Lee, will have her stomach stapled. Absurd

and unsendable, this letter's a loop through a hole.  
In all tenderness I'm trying to picture you well

in the somewhere that surrounds you.  
I'm hoping you have the strength to stand up

if someone unsteady needs the seat.  
I've seen doves' nest so slovenly

all their eggs fell. If a hapless pair  
drags their tails down your driveway, I trust

you'll throw crumbs. And when a neighbor  
knocks to ask if you noticed the moon,

I hope you'll stop  
whatever you're doing and join her

outside, saying, Certainly, it was a perfect platinum half.

#### I WALK OUT AND HEAR WHO CARES

By the automatic doors of Bartell's a blind man on a blanket  
Holds out his cap who cares if he cries who cares  
It's raining again and it's evening soon he'll stand up  
And move out of our minds who knows what  
His name is how many names should we know

In this slippery landscape I'm lacking in trust and good  
Usage my tires slashed by the Psycho who calls me  
To laugh the cops never catch him who cares  
If my hand's on the mace in my pocket if  
The blind man begs the length of the block

I'm walking carefully over ruptures and rifts what trees  
Can do to the sidewalk on the other side of the ocean  
A city crumbled tonight someone's job is counting the dead  
The rain ushers worms to the streets the surfaces  
My heels slick with them sliding a little what a starry-eyed world

We're still asking questions no one can answer  
What's wrong with the water what have we done  
To deserve this life these lips which blurt our words  
Lifting our tongues the truth therein hardly  
Truth nothing so unknotted our nervous systems

Named for what keeps us on edge the Psycho swears  
He'll wear me down then we'll marry how many  
Others walk through their fears to step into  
The rain where someone may be watching where  
Someone maybe cares so much he must kill you

#### Gary Gildner

Two Poems

#### A GIFT

Because I have been an excellent  
member of my credit card club, the club  
wants to give me, at no cost,  
what it calls a "Thank You"  
Accidental Death & Dismemberment  
Plan, that is to say, two thousand bucks  
for the loss of my Life or of both hands,  
or of both feet or the sight of both eyes—  
or a couple of combos I have to stop  
and think about, to wit, a hand and foot  
or one of the above plus an eye.

*"Would you pour me a glass of milk?  
I just got my sandwich together  
and can't let go."*

A hand, a foot, or an eye alone  
is not enough for the full  
two thousand; but should it happen  
that one of these will go, the club

forks over a grand. On the subject  
of taste or hearing or smell  
the club is mute. However  
there's a cool five hundred to be had  
for an index finger and thumb  
on the same hand. And  
here's the beauty of it all: I can up

*"So what's your feeling about tomorrow?  
Plant those tammies on the slope  
or build castles and stuff for the baby  
in that nice white sand down at Skookumchuck?"*

—can up the payoff for practically pennies  
a month. Moreover I am protected  
24 hours a day, Worldwide, even if  
I am flying on a common carrier.  
But no experimental craft, or crimes  
wherein I hurt myself, and naturally  
no self-inflictment on purpose  
with the intent to collect on this  
one-time offer. In the case  
of loved ones I will be happy to notice  
the company's Family Plan.

#### COLLECTING COWPIES

In sweet soggy spring  
when the mountain is soft  
and we file down the road  
past lilac, plum  
and the bowing dog-  
toothed violet,  
one behind the other  
following our wheelbarrow,  
it is to ease ourselves  
onto Fred's pasture.  
We go Lizzie through first,  
then Margaret who grips

an old serving spoon  
as I hand her over  
the three strands of wire,  
then me with my shovel.  
We have come to collect  
Fred's wonderful cowpies.  
We are veterans at this  
maneuver of scooping up  
perfect brown plops  
turned crusty on top  
in the feathery green,  
and dropping them in  
boxes stamped George  
Dickel, Western Family Honey  
and Celestial Orange Tea.  
We can't wipe off  
a goofy grin, feeling lucky,  
feeling connected to the genius  
who or which keeps  
turning everything over—  
and we can think of nothing  
we'd rather be doing right  
now, under a pale halo  
of moon floating up the valley  
and giddily holding on  
to our mountain,  
than gathering this gift,  
these rich ruminations,  
for our garden.

MOUNTAIN POOL

Olive-skinned, her eyes  
are dark, but she is sleeping.  
See how dreams travel  
like shoals of fish under the lid.  
The direction of the fish,  
though varied, is steady.  
The path leaves take  
when they retrace the wind.

See how these inclinations  
wear away this beach, this landing,  
hooved with tracks of night deer.  
And where they bank, this tree.  
Where they lap, the moss.  
How the light rafts  
on these circles, waves, roses.

In granite's strong catch  
grow the mud-roots of dogwood,  
the false fir and the true fir  
who, ignoring the granite,  
draw strength from the stream.  
And boulders like cows  
who come from the high ridges  
to dip long reptilian faces,  
crusted with black lichen.  
Here, they are happiest,  
open to the prevailing roots.

The white spider tight-ropes  
the span from bank to alder.  
The rock moss is shaped like a cup.  
Dragonfly, squirrel,  
fern fingers which trail in water  
have all come close,  
in thirst, to hear it filling.

SPRUCE

You, of all those walking, walk closest  
the age-old paths of water,  
keep a distance between you  
so that light can surround you.  
I am sorry to approach with my distractions.

Timothy, now tow-headed, the incandescent  
mullein, red osier dogwood,  
the spotted, gray-limbed alder,  
all spill their secrets to the wind.  
While you watch above them for the winter.

Your secrets: the moose sleeps next to you.  
The sun only spots your trunk,  
hidden like the pools  
your roots bridge and sink to.  
You, who stepped down from the banks.

Tight-lipped, blue flower, the light falls  
on your hands  
and not on the dark palms below them.  
Palms over hands  
and the dry limbs you tie in knots, or nests

for large birds who will disappear in you.  
Everything is tied to you,  
three of closure,  
tree of night, you who let  
the water speak the news of my life passing.

THE EROTIC DREAMS OF THE POOR

If you were here I'd like to lie here touching you  
In this darkness my voice against your body teaching  
The soft pages nobody explains the soft pages  
Of rain delivered across the avenues and yet  
I'd find your mouth as if I were returning to the years  
Of salt to those cities of grief in our air  
So that reaching out to hold them their shimmering  
Would become our transfer from this moment to another  
One of interiors growing dark growing specific like  
When we stick a candle in a bottle and call that  
A winter night while listening to this tape of a woman  
Singing to us about romance and disappearance  
Airport access roads and the grand coasts of betrayal  
To our south from which we return and care nothing  
For only this darkness around us like hair thrown down  
Across our faces while we kiss and I whisper It's alright  
I know the rich go on with their own special laws  
That they lift silver to their lips with meat-shaped forks  
Because I have wandered their streets in my bad tuxedo  
Searching for you everywhere and come only to this river  
With its skin of oil as colorful as sleep might seem  
After many nights alone with you

HERRINGBONE SKY

I.

The clouds bend like ethereal fish ribs.  
Thin striations of gas stretching above the peninsula,  
they predict twelve hours dry. After that, the ceiling drops in.  
Below the bones, we predict our own future  
in nimbostratus daydreams, blue possibilities.  
We imagine skies falling, or us sinking in them out of reach.  
We count the hours as they move by, collinear,  
the sky's waves marked by schools of smelt, shape-shifting.

II.

Four-by-five cameras catch good clouds and their shadows.  
In the pictures, thunderheads rise and struggle, illuminated errors  
of the horizon. A silver gelatin print: a small boy runs for shelter  
in the gathering of trailers. That his family's decisions  
have been forced is clear in the darkling atmosphere.  
A row of white rain hits the plain. Its fringed eyelashes  
and swirling funnels tell his bunch to get in the barrow pit,  
get out of their metal box of a home stuck on the land  
like a scar on a small child's face. The air strikes.

III.

No clinging, blowing winds now, only puffy, striated cotton  
from the Sistine Chapel dome, a false heaven  
so distant we stand under it alone. This is the mythic big sky:  
these spaces Montana-sized, these ranchers Sky Kings,  
this country's ceilings caught in WPA murals of the widened West,  
these cowboys framed in a landscape no less violent that we are.  
The anvil-shapes move past and go ten parasangs beyond us.  
We watch as if we could judge ourselves by their roiling,  
by the variable ways they shade our gaze.

IV.

I see Rorschach blurs, a combed mare's tail, an eagle  
and a lizard fighting a snake, entangled. Horizon

framing stops the skies in great Vs, sets them as  
vectors instead of backdrops. I watch the reddened  
edge of my homeland, knowing smoke from summer fires  
and the chaff of harvest has tinted the air into  
poison: in its haze, I see dusty Van Gogh eating his paint  
as the marks across the red sky push us to the earth below  
and ground us in the dirt. Too far away to read,  
the thin white streaks leave words of encouragement  
and sun splinters on the canvas of prairie rills.

V.

We cancel our plans to picnic beside the stream.  
The purple hoods anticipate hail; a hundred tiny stones  
fall from the sky instead of manna or fishes we'd hoped for.  
We stumble and run under eaves. I am sopped through  
to skin, cold to touch, and you are gently frozen. We dive  
for the covers, our bed's cloud of cotton gauze  
turning to a warm bath of action, a sponge. We wake to rain  
and our own hope, accumulated. In the misty domes,  
it bubbles above us. The sky drops its moist sweetness  
on rusted nails and roofing paper, on our acidic times.

## KENO

The woman wins by choosing six blinking squares in a block.  
Her pattern tells her past's architecture: try again, again.  
Quarters drop into her purse as she beats the odds & the machine's  
simple logic.

My eyes already are pressed by coins.

I smile to avoid showing the boredom of the dead.

A man leaves his cracked vinyl seat to fly out to the brittle seasons.

He joins the highway lights, strung white in the storm on a January  
night.

By the door, I expose my ears' metal hoops to deep cold.

I sing one sad, echoing note in the abandoned vaudeville hall.

The keno bells overwhelm me, and the woman says, Yes, at a win.

She makes a telephone call in the corridor.

I hum, inwardly, at the bar. I risk a ballad.

I test the rusty edges of cans in old dumps.

Gambling is pressing my dull shoes against yours like knife edges.

I try feeling your bony thighs against mine.

I look at street people on the gulch, bleary, predicting we will fail.

They say our damaged souls cannot survive by luck, fate, effort.

In sunlight, I wear dark glasses to hide & will it not to happen.

The numbers chime again.

I hold my wallet like my heart.

## *Sarah Cotterill*

### SUSAN IN THE POTTER'S FIELD

1

If they went down far enough  
they would tap into sweet water

but first they will have to spade  
through cowpies, graves  
of the cicada and what's left

of ferns, along with  
two good used  
clavicles,

cache of broken crockery

escape hatch of meadow  
vole, the shrew's  
asylum

mine

2

Yesterday eight brawny men with straps  
let you down that shaft

left you lying down there  
with your blue dress

one cyclamen bloom and the skate key  
a sister remembered you might need

Did you hear them muttering  
about the dumb weight  
before they let fall  
the lid

The dark worried you, and the quiet  
because it was always night when  
the voices who got by without bodies  
came

You're safe now —  
even if they'd stowed away they can't  
have skates on. And you came in first at this  
once and remember better than  
anyone in the family  
the jingles.

It should be smooth going  
down there you won't find sidewalks  
with cracks, so if something breaks  
in our mother

no one could blame you

3  
If they had gone down far enough  
they could have reached sweet water —

the flower will go first  
then your body  
your blue gown

and last, the scuffed nickel of the key  
will fall slowly through arch  
of sternum to lie against the white column  
of spine

and the lead box itself will fall slowly

a lift going down through many strata  
of lives.

You will be there before any of us.

But watch for us. Remember the way for us.  
Help us get through  
these verses in our right voice.

Help us with tightening and loosening. A key

hangs by its string, banging against our chest  
and we jerk along, hardly staying up.

*Susan Grimm*

Two Poems

RAVENOUS FLOWER

Thunder like gunfire pulls me under.  
It is happening again in that old  
country. The earth breaks open, a bloody

marvel pouring forth change,  
disintegration, death. Fear paints  
the green hills, the chestnut trees.

I close my eyes. Only the pain  
is bright; the morning when I lose  
my child—How can I live?—

the dread when she is restored to me.  
Your yellow star of comfort  
is a mockery, a wheel spinning

on the juggernaut of death. I remember  
flowers growing, blue spears that waved,  
petals that felt like bits of flesh.

## DANCING BACKWARDS

I love the moon and the Baron's wings,  
how he rose from the floor of mist  
at the beginning of Act II. And each recall  
of the swan song lifts me a little higher  
from my seat. The feet of the corps  
de ballet in regimental flutter sound  
like birds in flight. So many women  
in white—the brides, Odette, the women  
as birds. Women as offering. Women  
on display, hands whittling their waists.

It's only a story. I don't want to harangue,  
but by intermission I am tight-faced and glad  
my daughter isn't here like these matinee  
girls in Christmas dresses with ribbons  
in their hair. This isn't about good  
and evil, this is about control. The Baron,  
owl-master of the swans; Siegfried, boy-  
master of love; the woman who can only be a bird.

It's only a story, but the symbols are wrong.  
We do not want to die for love—  
young, without smiling, wrapped in tulle.  
Women are not flowers. We have more  
than one season. Women are not birds.  
Raise no nets in the sky.

I knew a ballerina who afterward lay  
with her legs up the wall, feet burning;  
contained by the stage which was not the world,  
the ship which brought her over the lake  
of tears; in photographs, in factories hunched  
over the staccato music of her machine;  
with sweat, in pain, her fabled body  
softening to dust in the final box of her bed.  
Was she not real? Was she not beautiful?

## Laura McKee

### LAST POEM ABOUT THE MOON

A glacier's hand once held these fields  
so tightly in its fist, the ground  
still rises from the memory of that grasp,  
slowly, like the clock's long unwinding.  
I cannot sleep. Sounds loosen, tap

the window as if to drain the moon  
seas at breaking intervals. Mare  
Imbrium. Mare Imbrium. Tranquility  
laps an inch  
away from the eaves on the inside wall  
where a former tenant climbed a ladder  
one summer to paint the geometric teeth  
of a wave or castle battlement.  
Burnt umber. The room runs counter-

clockwise and I am a skullcapped fool wandering  
the sea's perimeter again, tin cup in hand.

To empty the sea means the work of another  
at my back. A better half-sleep returns me

to the flood plains years after preservation  
has changed mud to subsidized barley—food  
for the snow geese who come in flocks  
from the Arctic on full-wing miles, extended  
bouts of cacophony. The careful March  
pastoral turns and I send whales to the moon,  
see that the herds sow the dry lunar beds  
with a crop of broken songs. But nothing grows  
and I am not strong enough to keep them  
there. Exhaustion brings us home;

we drift toward the shallows, filter mouthfuls



of sand through glass jaws until morning  
surprises the living with a man-made hunger  
of sockets. Open-eyed, I shake the dust  
from my hands, rise on the fragile cast  
of a shadow's weakened back.

**Richard Robbins**

THE END OF THE WORLD

*The CoEvolution Quarterly once reported that the pilot of the Air Force's SAC  
flying command post wore an eye patch at all times so he'd have sight when/after  
he gazed at an H-bomb going off somewhere above the United States.*

When we took the pill to keep us  
from hating each other, when the daffodils  
made music from the center of the earth fly out  
their trumpets, honking soft as far-away horns,  
we could walk around as if the day  
never really happened. Along the river

humans made quiet love in foreign cars,  
and grain silos across the water  
rose for the first time, it seemed to us,  
climbing before us above the highest  
level of the bluff, the names of bread  
in twenty-foot letters. We were not

denied that day: I held your hand. Late sun  
woke up the first new bugs. When our shoes  
sprang back into mud of the path, we knew,  
and we laughed, about being *too* connected,  
a new species struggling from the muck,  
learning to walk upright. We held to each other

block after block, and we knew the city  
part of us as dark came on, all the flashing  
signs pulling at the gut, turned to a blind dance

in praise of bread. Why had we hated? On a lake  
we could both watch inside us, men and women  
fished at night in small boats, their lights

going up and down in a line  
writing the music to that dance. As the drug  
wore off, we became two people again,  
I let your hand telegraph the end,  
cruising at 50,000 feet, the sharp sun  
up, over the entire earth's curve, burning the one good eye.

## About Our Contributors

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David Wagoner  
Editor

