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Poetry

NORTHWEST



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POETRY NORTHWEST

VOLUME THIRTY-SIX

NUMBER TWO

SUMMER 1995

KIMBERLY SWAYZE Three Poems	3
LEN ROBERTS Two Poems	9
SHANNON BORG Under the City, Under the Sea	12
CATHERINE COAN How We Sleep	13
K. NURKSE Two Poems	15
BOB HICOK Two Poems	18
NANCY KUHL In the Arbor	21
MARGARET WEAVER Two Poems	22
DON RUSS The Cicadas at the Lake	24
HAYLEY R. MITCHELL Rain	25
MICHAEL CADNUM Three Poems	26
KEVIN STEIN Broken Pines	29
DINA BEN-LEV Two Poems	31
GARY GILDNER Two Poems	33

MELISSA KWASNY Two Poems	36
STEPHEN ROBERT GIBSON The Erotic Dreams of the Poor	38
NOELLE SULLIVAN Two Poems	39
SARAH COTTERILL Susan in the Potter's Field.....	41
SUSAN GRIMM Two Poems	43
LAURA MCKEE Last Poem about the Moon.....	45
RICHARD ROBBINS The End of the World	46

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.
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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 slung 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.

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WE NEED YOUR HELP

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

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

David Wagoner
Editor

