

VOLUME XXXVII • NUMBER 1 • SPRING 1996 • \$5.00

Poetry
NORTHWEST



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POETRY NORTHWEST SPRING 1996 VOLUME XXXVII, NUMBER 1

Published quarterly by the University of Washington, Room 201B Administration Building, Box 351240 Seattle, WA 98195-1240. Subscriptions and manuscripts should be sent to *Poetry Northwest*, 4045 Brooklyn Avenue NE, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98105-6261. Not responsible for unsolicited manuscripts; all submissions must be accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope. Subscription rates: U.S., \$15.00 per year, single copies \$5.00; Foreign and Canadian, \$17.00 (U.S.) per year, single copies \$5.50 (U.S.).

Second-class postage paid at Seattle, Washington.
POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Poetry Northwest*,
4045 Brooklyn Avenue NE, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98105-6261.
Published by the University of Washington
ISSN: 0032-2113

Photo by Robin Seyfried

POETRY NORTHWEST

VOLUME THIRTY-SEVEN

NUMBER ONE

SPRING 1996

JOSIE KEARNS New Numbers	3
KATHLEEN LYNCH Two Poems	10
BRUCE MACKINNON Four Poems	12
CULLEN BAILEY BURNS Contrition	16
OLIVER RICE Two Poems	17
THOM WARD Where I Work Is Your Street	22
ANSIE BAIRD Believe It	23
ALEXANDRA VAN DE KAMP In the Porcelain Gallery: A Study of Figurines	24
JEFF WORLEY Walking through a Spiderweb	26
JOAN SWIFT Ophthalmologies	27
LYNN MARTIN Woodwork	28
MAC HAMMOND The Wishbone	29
KEVIN CRAFT Two Poems	30

PAULANN PETERSEN Two Poems	32
DAVID MOOLTEN Bee	35
SIGMAN BYRD Two Poems	36
WESLEY MCNAIR Two Poems	38
WILLIAM AIKEN Two Poems	40
PATTIANN ROGERS Four Poems	42

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POETRY NORTHWEST

SPRING 1996

Josie Kearns

NEW NUMBERS

KISURA

As kids we always told the story
of Barbara Mullhall going down more
than three times at Myers Lake
and how her toes pointed
to the July sun like the mast
of an astrolabe, her body,
watery yacht below.
Then she rose like some bloated
undead, face red, heaving regular air.
First Kisura.

Kisura is the lazarus number:
deus ex machina, the cavalry,
breath in stone.
The dead one comes.
Kisura.

But Kisura can even be TV.
Burgess Meredith as Bemis
in the Serling episode
where atomic bombs explode

while Burgess/Bemis lies safe as a C-note asleep in the bank vault.
Celluloid Kisura.

Or the real man, 1859, who lived through *nuee ardente*, the "glowing cloud" of Mont Pelee, rocketing its sulphur and pumice skyward while lava plugged all the mouthed O's, thick as wet cement, save this man, convicted murderer, in a sealed jail cell. He survived to become a missionary.
Historic Kisura.

I've known it, too, saved when
I was seven by some older boy
my mother screamed at onshore:
"Jesus! She's drowning!"
And the two men I turned away
like peddlers in the dark-finned Chevy.
Driver flicking his Camel
the backseat guy opening his door to me
like the lid of a navy coffin.
"Hey, little girl."
But I spun around
straight into a policeman
whom I didn't trust, either, walked
all the long way home, eyes over
my shoulder like a darting shark's
my head the antennae cage on radar
every half-block.
Childhood Kisura.

I was born in the perfect decade
of Jonas Salk and redemption.
Surely, that was Kisura.
Kisura says, "It just so happened . . ."

that the paramedics packed my blood type
when they came to get me
that when I slammed down hard
on linoleum slats

I heard my mother's voice
whisper in my head like a fugue.
Personal Kisura.

Kisura is the second parachute opening
the empty .45 chamber, the failsafe.
Coma heart and failed kidney pumping.
Second chance.
Take it.

CALLARUM

This time when you cross over
the fieldstone bridge
the homeless man underneath
reaches up, beckons or waves
some hazy signal like a fogged lighthouse
and you notice the bluish glinting—
like a cloudy zircon facet
of your mother's engagement ring, now scratched
with dough-kneading and the grinding of meat—
his left eye
the only good one
in the six a.m. sunbeam juts out
of a parting nimbus
like an ice floe into the mind
of fifty party-goers on the *Titanic*
that first, throat-tightening staticky anxiety.

You wonder, if you were walking
slowly, not driving, whether you would
give him coins, the Susan B.'s you've been hoarding.
Carried like talismen
against some secret
you want to forget you know—
your mother's death? your child taken away?—
you wonder if he's beckoning
because someone else is there with him
underneath his granite canopy,

some human or pet obscured
as he asks for help, or if the wave
was merely a reckoning
of your uninterrupted glaze, like a laser
over the heart of the highway.

And if he has waved or beckoned each time
before your blue Mercedes or six-pistoned Chevy
went barreling past, sure torpedo, but not past
the *Andrea Doria* doom
the water full of silly plankton
like this man, orange-earmuffed and fatigued
by Army surplus and circumstance
and he's just tired and pissed off
that you haven't exactly seen him
until this time, Callarum—
like the instant you finally notice
a grasping, when your sister tells you she has
sold the zircon, broken down the setting
and settled for a pinkie circlet
darker, less worthy stone of topaz
the jeweler told her
would lighten in time and this is the time, Callarum,
that you are careful not to say the value of nothing.

Callarum is how many times you pass unnoticed
yourself and how many times unnoticing.
Callarum is *until*.

Callarum comes for you
like an iceberg or missile
like the man under the bridge
or the frame of the *Hindenburg* 16mm
replayed a Callarum number of times
until you realize that
it's not the zeppelin singed like hair
not ring or bridge
but one man's disaster:
combustible, incendiary.

HYSTRA

Choosing the day I'd live over is simple:
my mother's 39th birthday
when I rode my Schwinn like a schooner
down cracks of breakneck driveways,

*This is the place-holder:
the cache of souls unopened,
Bernadette's letter sealed.*

six streets over to the Ben Franklin's
to buy with my own dollar the thin, glass-blown
chalices, one-use-only "Fragrances of the World":

*An isotope zero
where your fused and unfused life
becomes matrix.*

Evening in Paris, Tigress, Ambush, Tabu
titles as dangerous as the 7-Up and chablis mix
she sometimes let me sip at parties
as she would this night

*A continuum of ladder and hinge:
what swings there
not even the moon
knows the end of*

where mounds of potato salaç and rhubarb pie
and the blueberry cake Aunt Ann baked that day
would greet her with my stepfather Ray's gift
of the double-sink kitchen cabinets when we shouted

*as a plutonium zero
as a cascade
woven by the dead*

"Surprise!" and her loam-brown eyes

misted over and I was still
nine or ten

*like a pressure valve
an airlock wheel
on a submarine*

and the cards of canasta and gin rummy
the Old Granddad whiskey bottle, never empty
(by which I mean Ray did not drink
like my father)

*The last Chinese box
in the long tradition of boxes.
The door that is a box.*

my brother-in-law and stepfather sitting
at the yellow and chrome kitchen table
and the lumber soon to be painted
"redwood" stacked outside like bonds
to ensure a future of perfect fences

1066
November 22, 1963
Cinque de Mayo
2001

where it fell to these men, white
T-shirted and overalled, to pound in the poles
of that fence as if this life would stay
where we put it.

*The Secret Annex
never found*

And I fell
asleep that night under
that same table listening to the grinding
of stories my aunts told, voices weaving
a thick canopy, lifting me toward sleep

*your private compartment
your false wall, hidden spring
survival kit*

in a language as foreign and majestic
as Lima, Peru, I learned about that morning
second hour geography class

*rough diamonds
in the 1930's coat sleeve
lined in black taffeta*

that night I dreamed
my bed was the shape of Peru
landlocked, yet water kept
seeping in, monsoon

*the bubble of time
between moments,
the planck numeral*

In the middle of that night
under the table they almost
didn't find me

*This is Hystra the trapdoor
Hystra the dice
in your unbroken life.*

as if I'd disappeared
through a doorway
into now.

Katbleen Lynch

Two Poems

SUB URBAN LOVE NOTE

The Rapid Transit car does a slow lurch,
then stops. In a tunnel.
Underground.

Under the city.
The city I am trying to reach.
In which I do not live.

This is how I love you: like a traveler.
Transported. A natural alien.
Afraid to go but going anyway.

A slight delay they say.
No explanation. Am I the only one pretending
not to shriek and claw my way out?

I can smell their breath. Their bodies.
The fact is we are trapped
in a metal canister beneath tons of earth.

Don't worry, a young man pipes to his girlfriend,
his laugh light and high.
Just above us—the city. Air everywhere.

Buildings splashed with light.
Sharp breezes when you turn the corner.
Clumps of strangers crossing when the lights change.

Trust everywhere.
I want to be there. *There*.
Which is a place you say we can never reach.

You say, *Be here now*.
Which is where I am. In a transit car
stuck under the city. Trying to come to you.

Writing these words across the street map.
Where you are an X on a black line.
It is an abstraction. It is my destination.

This is how I love you. Bravely.
You will never know how brave.
The car shudders and grinds forward.

WAITING FOR RESULTS

Right now it is happening,
and it seems colors are all
that come to me
when there is not enough air

and the phone won't ring
until the doctors close your body
and reveal what grays and greens
and dark masses

have grown there. Here the kitchen
is cleaner than it needs to be
and from the window the verbena
is an almost hurtful purple.

Heavenly blue morning
glories seem surreal with their mute
white throats shriveling shut in the heat.
Hot-orange gladiolas attract

hummingbirds shot with gold.
Pink Breath of Heaven is in bloom,
the wide green lawn intensely green,
the air hot and still as held breath.

Practically nothing moves
but the birds, some smaller things
with wings, and the gray & yellow
lizard on the ledge. It shunts

from shade to sun, sun
to shade, regulating its body
temperature, knowing what it needs
to know, in control

of its perfectly acceptable life.

Bruce MacKinnon

Four Poems

ATLANTIS

How is it she comes back, resurrected,
always rising like the corn, her body like yours
spread across the motel bed, the ocean still outside,
the rain mapping the sand, the doorway open,
pelicans and gulls drawn in gray and blue. The waves
whisper outside the doors, where desire undresses
each one slowly, first curling as far and as slow
as the eye can see, then building power until the horizon
comes closer, is there at your feet, where you grow
out of the ground, rooted a moment more, before you go
with her and everything tastes of salt and honeysuckle,
the one drop from each bitten, cream-brown flower.
Her legs are here and then there, the nape of the neck,
the shoulders, the grains of sand, clear and white
as sugar that roughs the skin, that bruises the soft inside
of a thigh, the goddess reclining like the history
of the world. And then the instant it takes to see flowers
on the table, Queen Anne's lace and black-eyed Susans,
a thousand eyes bring you into the room,
where the mist curls as she looks up, her hands behind her,
over her head now and beneath a pillow as if grasping
through the clouds for something just beyond
the headboard and through the wall in the next room,
where mermaids become human with desire, and Atlantis
lies buried. You'll soon see if the mist rolls off,
if the announcer gets it right, the one whose blurred voice

you hear somewhere between the bands of static
the waves make, the sheets make, she makes as she moves,
rolling between planes, fingernails long and red as poppies,
as your bodies rise from the waves of sheets
like the backs of dolphins, beyond the black rocks,
or the blink of the lighthouse down the coast,
a warning rising up against the sky for ships
to come no farther, that beyond that point,
they must not go.

THE KISS

Wait. The chapel angel will be with you,
he said, for the next three days, just
kneel and pray and meditate. Cleansing
is what he calls it, like a cold that burns
away the dross, like the sun that burns
away the morning mist. Wait. But the stream
does not clear. The mad monkey runs
through the house. The great whale swims
too deep. A light comes up from the chest
and then dims again. The chapel angel
whispers, but its holy breath sounds
only like air conditioning. Sleep.
You are not this, not that. Lines intersect
like telephone wires that grid the city,
like a spider web built to catch a fly.
Your sad father walks from his end
of the glass hallway. It's no one's fault,
your mother says, as she prepares you
for the white hospital gown and the slippers,
for the shoulders beginning to hunch.
Happiness, your father's told you,
is the key, and you wonder just how
this can be found. He is less strong,
you think, his muscles, he must not be
doing his isometrics here, he must not be . . .
what can he be doing to fill the days,
is he reading *Moby Dick* again, is he

working on his pottery, will they let you
bring your guitar here next time so
the two of you can sing together? You
can do anything you want to do, born
at mid-century, born on the day
the god of the well looks up and begins
to climb, as the earth, the hemisphere
stirs, hears the trumpet call, as
the great cave bear feels wakening hunger.
Failure, he says, is a gift, the hanged
man, the body turned upside down, the kiss
of Judas without which there is no next act,
it's Genghis Khan dragging the quickening
future with him, the murderer who meets Buddha
on the road, Saul knocked from the horse,
spirit and flesh fused as hammer and nail,
father and son join at the center of the cross.

BORED

Tonight I'm lying on the railroad tracks,
the Virginia stars fixed uncertainly
in the black sky, my buddies beside me,
the three of us, who tomorrow the engineer
will say looked like cardboard boxes,
and we're almost sure that the train
will pass over us—as why wouldn't it?
And if it doesn't I guess it won't matter.
What else is there to do, the summer so deep
and green? Some might wake up tomorrow
and think us foolish to lie down between
the tracks, to hold our breath, to sink
as far as we can into the still warm gravel,
wishing ourselves below the rails.
And the whiskey makes me feel the way
I did when my father used to pick us up
and spin us dizzy, whirling us around and
around like two hands on a roaring clock.

A HUNGER ARTIST

On the path through the woods: a photograph, polaroid nearly in the wa-
ter, as if it fell from someone's pocket, of a young girl, maybe sixteen,
naked, lying on a bed, her hands over her breasts, her right leg crossed
over her left leg, her figure full, her olive skin smooth, her eyes looking
away from the camera as if she didn't really want this picture taken, as if
this kind of guilt went beyond lying there, maybe on her parents' bed, in
the late morning or early afternoon—you can't tell from the picture,
only the figure on the sheets, a dark wood headboard behind her, blank
white walls, and a nightstand with a white telephone that seems about to
ring. You don't see all of this immediately. You pick the photo up and
put it quickly in your pocket, wondering as you do if this is a trick, like
the wallet on a string your friends dangle across a sidewalk every April
Fool's Day, snatching it away from greedy hands, the group of them
hanging from their office window and braying. But the woods are empty;
you can easily see through the winter trees, the leafless branches, and
the dog you walk is not often surprised, her sense of danger more primi-
tive, or momentary, than yours. You think you will burn it, or tear it up,
but you feel an undertow, thinking of her crossed legs in your pocket.
Later, sitting in your car with the engine running, you'll think about the
sky above the ice-skating rink where your son goes round and round, the
evergreens that sweep the air, and then about Kafka's story, wondering
about how much is enough, the artist's death, ribs poking up through the
straw, and the second ending, the panther in the cage, the raw meat.

Cullen Bailey Burns

CONTRITION

"What is there to regret?... if I had to be born a thousand times again, I would be a thousand times what I have been."

—Klaus Barbie

He had to say that. He had to say that.
Had to. See how the leaves have yellowed
and begun to clutter the sidewalk like something important
parked behind the car, like Maggie's trike.
A logical place to park, really,
until I pulled A.J. Foyt backs out of the driveway
and can't apologize enough. But he couldn't say,
You children can't possibly understand
what I'm about to do. Better to take it
as a job well done. My girl never stepping in the path
of a car, say, or hating me someday
for the ways I've erred. And I have, oh,
taken her perfect arms and said,
*You must put this shirt on, or I'm gonna swat
your butt, or Why are you so goddamned stubborn.*
And ten million apologies won't change my carelessness,
my hair-into-the-wind stomp on the accelerator,
pushing the bike all sideways on itself,
that tiny metal crunch. She might have been on it.
And whose children were they, rolling off to camps
with names like china breaking—Treblinka, Bergen Belsen,
Dachau; children waiting for their big teeth
to grow in like white kernels of corn,
bone chips, the ridges for cutting through gums
still to be worn down and sifted away.
He had to say he'd do it again. No other
life could forgive him.

Oliver Rice

Two Poems

DOMESTICITIES

1. THE ANTIQUE LAMP

Mere light was never quite the point.
A flaming stick will open up the darkness,
or oil from the blubber of a whale.
Still, she was once the latest thing,
the envy of the candles,
with her adjustable wick and her glistening chimney,
her porcelain chamber for the kerosene,
charmingly rotund,
delicately flowered,
and her porcelain shade to match.
Even now, rudely converted,
trucked out with bulb and cord,
she casts a tasteful ambience.
And that is all very well.
One wishes to be of use.

But one is, indubitably more than that, a presence.
One has a certain vintage
One does disdain the vulgarities that come and go.
To the cultivated,
true bearing is its own reward.

2. THE TOOL BOX

In this congested working-class enclave,
their manners are abrasive
and their outlook repressed.
But they are hardened to the jostling and jabbing,
the closing of their door upon the larger world,
by a code of survival
that reaches back through the lineage of their trades
to the Stone Age.
True, it is a mean and menial existence,

narrow, obscure, and unhygienic.
True, they submit to the indignity
of saving us from our ineptitudes,
of repairing a faucet
or concocting a sandbox.
But notice their demeanor,
cool, competent, adamantly aloof.
They are a caste apart,
quite possibly a fifth estate.
They remember, if we forget,
that they were instrumental at Karnak,
at Westminster, at Los Alamos.
And they will surely be called to Armageddon.

3. THE ANCESTRAL PORTRAIT

The Hova of Madagascar
digs up his dead relatives once a year
and fetters their legs.
We understand.
These specters in their comical garb
pursue us into our very recreations.
Their relentlessly poignant eyes penetrate even death.

We could evade them,
if they would confine themselves to admonitions,
to carping about the hours we keep
and moralizing about the way our money is spent.
But that is not their need.
What they want,
now that they know how everything turned out,
now that all else has been reduced to vanity,
is the answer to one inane
and irretrievably ultimate question:
What was the meaning of life?

4. THE VACUUM CLEANER

This is your master exhibitionist,
forever costumed for an entrance,

as if in his consuming and compulsive fantasy
he is always poised to leap
into an arena or a pulpit,
onto a high wire or a stage.

At the cue, he goes into his shtick,
exuberant, prodigious, and slick.

With a sweeping flourish, he wraps up
and exits to a burst of silent applause.

Out of the public eye,
notoriety vibrating in his bowels,
he immediately begins gearing up
for his next appearance.

5. THE BABY GRAND

Not more than the saxophone, of course,
it is endearingly grotesque.
Heart, soul, and psychomotor facilities
commingled in one deft casket,
as if to have done with the temporal from the start,
it stands on three discreet legs,
hunched against the prosaic world.
A fourth extremity attaches its sensibility to its toes,
weight enough.

Parting its lips to converse,
it reveals its most striking feature,
a marvelous smile,
its keys gleaming with expectation.
Although it grows sullen if long neglected,
it is convivial by nature,
amenable to every mood.

Most fortunately, to occupy its idle hours,
it has the gift of nostalgia,
of recalling in vivid aura
its many dialogues with Chopin

and Debussy and Liszt and Papa Haydn,
even a few of the moderns.

With the proper persuasion,
it will repeat them word for word,
sometimes quite eloquently.

6. UNDER THE SINK

No doubt the house has truly dark secrets,
stowed among the cast-off toys
or cleverly disguised as ducts for ventilation.
But here, with disarming candor,
is congregated the evidence
of lesser, more admissible faults—
a disposition to soil and mess,
which requires a touch of soap
and a brush or two—
an occasional lapse into sloth,
which tolerates the rag unrinsed,
the trowel uncleaned,
the can unsealed—
a rare susceptibility to microbes,
yes, even vermin,
for which a politely packaged corrective is exposed—
creaturely failings, all,
well accepted and under control,
not one a cause for shame or fear.

And perhaps so—
although it is a notably shadowed place
with no name.

GETTING A LIFE

No, no, from out of town.
Yes, yes, new paint, low rent,
but
do these walls despise ignorance?
Is this a doorway
from which unthinkable words might be spoken?

No, no, self-employed.
Yes, yes, the bus stop, the market,
but
in this mirror
can I resurrect myself
from the rubble of sleep?
Will the flashbacks find their way?

Do I detect an odor
of the collective angst?

Please leave me here alone.
No, no, until my syndromes have tried the light.

Thom Ward

WHERE I WORK IS YOUR STREET

although, each day around noon
as small kids twist in ropes and a siren
clips the tops of maples, it's mine too.
I wear a coat but no watch,
eat my lunch on a bench
in the middle of the playground:
spray paint, wooden towers,
the perfect diamonds of link fences.

I haven't seen you by the copper beech
or among the men without jobs
who find shade enough to laugh,
leave cans and sharp bottles.
You aren't on the asphalt, bright
with scalloped glass and boys
shouting, shooting rainbow jumpers.

This bench has iron feet.
I have bologna and cheese.
The longer I sit, the further I move
from what I know, which
is nothing of you, or the wind
filling the whittled grooves
of obscenities and hearts.

Ansie Baird

BELIEVE IT

My friend from St. Paul
Drives all the way to
St. Louis to see the sun
Eclipse the moon or
The moon eclipse the sun
I forget which one.

Oblivious I switch on
The electric light and
Keep on writing while
Midday slouches aside
And my desk shrouds itself
In sudden dusk.

My specific sun reigns
Right where it always does
If I happen to glance up
And that cool slippery
Moon stays casually slapped
Flat against black.

No doubt each orb cuts
Loose from time to time
When I'm not checking.
Good luck to them. Good
Luck to all of us
Who flail and spin

In transitory light
But stay the course.

Alexandra van de Kamp

IN THE PORCELAIN GALLERY: A STUDY
OF FIGURINES

—Zwinger Palace, Dresden, 1994

Could life ever be this delicate, this carefully positioned?

Two lovers, the woman with a birdcage
in one hand, the man poised

to kiss her, straddle a dog
curled on the ground. The dimple of air

between their lips reveals the polished corridors
of a museum, a guard tipped

against a chair. Outside, noon
is a hectic yellow

through which tourists glide
across the evenly cut lawns of the palace.

And these lovers? They stand on a verdant island—
small weights almost capable of pinning

the boundaries

of the day down. Fixed, forever in place,
they are *the known*,

alongside which *the unknown*
can happen. For instance, you, shutting the door,

shrinking the space
I can see you by

until only book spines and wallpaper
persist in the visible. Two jesters

with musical notes inscribed
upon their sleeves

pirouette on a table,
a man and a woman

kiss

their cheeks made one
in the flow of the porcelain. Things swish past

their definitions, fly bitterly
through us. The body ages by accepting

almost anything. I want crispness,
the confident lines of journeys

already written. These shapes
calmly brilliant: a man leans over a table

a pen in his hand as he writes across
a shellacked page. A mint-green river wanders

down this vase as a Japanese woman stares
out her window: two men fish, blue mountains

pierce the distance—each color, iridescent, residue
to what lies beyond vision.

And I have seen August evenings
saturate trees with rosy-wet light,

blouses on the line billow out
empty in the wind, sculpting the shapes of the lives

that have used them. A life seeps
into its details,

we use what is near to navigate
the unfathomable.

Jeff Worley

WALKING THROUGH A SPIDERWEB

I believed only air
stretched between the dogwood

and the barberry: another
thoughtless human assumption

sidetracking the best story
this furrow spider knew to spin.

And, trying to get the sticky
filament off my face, I must look,

to the neighbors, like someone
being attacked by his own nervous

system, a man conducting an orchestra
of bees. Or maybe it's only the dance

of human history I'm reenacting:
caught in his own careless wreckage,

a man trying to extricate himself,
afraid to open his eyes.

Joan Swift

OPHTHALMOLOGIES

1.
What does the ophthalmologist see when he looks in my eye?
The one that grows a horticulture on its retina
sweet peas, anthuriums, morning glories, the strange root
of the rutabaga, spadixes, cymes, pinnately delicate
leaves that drift on the wind of those cells called cones
dropping from the branch of my optic nerve *color color*.
A rain of detritus awash in a vitreous sea.
The inflamed nest the lens flew away from,
sweet crystalline protein gatherer of light.
Not these inflorescences he can't even imagine,
wanting me to count fingers which are for touching
while the vines of injury climb into my brain
through the caves of its cortices, right and left,
so I will never see or think the same way again.

2.
When I am strapped and draped, he cuts the conjunctiva
with a pair of scissors. Bee sting. Snake bite.
Then with a blade he skates over the white of the sclera,
clear thin corneal ice. It is here he enters my eye,
that globe that snows everything upside down.
I think I am crying but it is only the water
of the river where the tiger iris opens so wide
its dream rushes out, the one about deer and birds.
I stare at the surgeon. He stares into my head
to see how the displaced lens dies under its skin
of light and the wall goes up between him
and the darkness that keeps my life remembered.
The lens has an equator he pierces with an emulsifier.
He sucks away its fullness like a cup of milk.

3.
Lightning striking my retina's sky, zig-zag bolts
and the streak of a pitcher's 95-an-hour sinking
fast ball. Glisten of dew drops along the rim

like suns moving across a mid-winter Arctic horizon.
And the crow's wing flaps down, feather of blindness
beating on my optic nerve. With his speculum
he opens my eye. He has forceps too as if an infant
waited to be born, the one called *sight*
he holds with a Dacron suture so that my retina
once again cries for its images. But only memory
lifts the pine needles from their blur, a focus
of mind the yellow finch and the varied thrush,
while the ciliary muscles shrink and my eye is a beggar
among branches, seeking the world.

Lynn Martin

WOODWORK

After so many years you learned
the nature of the work.
When this was all you could have:
scorched heartpine—tongue and
groove. Abandoned, oak barn boards.
Sweet-scented, blood-red cedar.

Once a builder told me this story.
A man came looking for work.
He had a hammer and a rusty
hand-saw. It was a local job—
sidewalks for the neighborhood.
Simple form work to hold the mix
until the concrete set hard.

Backwoods, fresh milled poplar. Chestnut.
Walnut—stacked and
drying for a hundred years in
someone's catch-all shed.

So the builder gave the man
dimensions, a pile of boards, a bucket

of nails. Then the builder kindly
walked away. Said he'd be back.
The man kneeled. Leaned into his saw.

When this was all you could have:
warehouse pallets, railroad ties,
scorched heartpine, green,
falling-into-the-river birch.

"Now imagine," said the builder, "finding
a form so perfectly joined, you could
take it home and live with it
like a well-made thing."

Scorched heartpine. Green,
falling-into-the-river birch.

Mac Hammond

THE WISHBONE

It was not a family feast, just the two of us
Picking at the carcass of a fowl, a hen
Or rooster, baked and cold from the fridge.
It was not an anniversary, no time of good
Hope for years to come, no summing up, no
Resolutions—an ordinary day, work done,
The children overnight at Grandma's. You
Looked tired still, six months from my last
Breakdown. I carved the chicken, served you
The front end of the breast, that small part
With the wishbone. After dinner, tears
Stood in our eyes, as in a ballet we pulled,
Wish made, at the wishbone. I wished
To be done with the re-enactments of
Childhood. I think you wished for my return.
Snap, and I still do not know which end
Wins, the shortshank spindle or the club.

K

Sturdiest of consonants—oak of the forest,
clap of the hand, flying buttress

at the back of the throat. As upright
as a monk in a garden hoeing corn,

tending rows of new tomatoes, shoveling
dung in a cowshed done milking the cows

at dawn. Potash of flue dust
melted into glass. Salty cant of sailors

in the harbor at Tyre. Fulcrum,
pivot, ricochet—sheer

kinetic fury of hot gas—the big
bang in kosmos, silent prayer in kneel.

Kingmaker, capstone, coral reef,
sand bank where waves break in long lines

off the coast. Reassurance in OK, swift
jab and black-out in KO.

In heaven, cumulus; kilometer on earth.
Worth its weight in gold, pearl, salt.

Clap of the hand—coldest of zeros
that slows the restless atom to a halt.

SOLAR PROMINENCE

There is a way the stars
figure in desire,
but it's not what you think.
That one planet
or another winks out the night
you are born
means little anymore, though
it used to be disaster.
Now when the sun
enters one house no one bothers
to pick up after it—the lease
is month-to-month.
The sun doesn't mind.
Consider: it's never led a spotless life
to begin with.
Tenant to whichever sign
it still throws
the same dazzling weight around.
Now that's desire: the dark
that forms a rash as cooler currents
cross its face
marks the surge and crashing
end of one stupendous
arc of flame.

COLLISION

In the corner of my dreaming eye
I spot a car—
speeding streak of red

intent on me—in time
to hit the brakes, breaking the sweet
escape of a Sunday's

stolen nap. Thunderclap
of hairline luck
slams me back. Alive and it's

still Sunday,
the day I should see
my mother who's been stalled between

dying and death
for two motionless, unspeaking
unspeakable years,

her closed-eye,
then open-eyed hours
alike: one great unshaken sleep

whose dreams or dreamlessness
lies beyond detection,
beyond my most fervent call.

The phone call I more than half hoped
would interrupt my nap—
one from the man I'm sure

isn't right for me—
still hasn't come. I have no more notion
of love and me and men

than I did at seventeen, divining lyrics
of some dreamy song,
mining its words for a clue.

That whole batch
of hotcakes I ate too fast,
a breakaway breakfast because I seldom

fix just for myself, is still
a dull clump
caught in my chest. I'm stuck

with stubborn lodgers
in my body, struck with the thud
of what awaits,

but spared, yes *saved* and now
wildly awake—
a bride of narrow escape.

A VAPOR, IT RISES AT WAKING

Here, you are no age,
none at all. The tense is ever present, *is* is all there
is, you are simply,
presently you.

Your face—if you could
see its calm, or knit
of puzzlement, knot of fear—
is indeed your face,
the same moon of shadowed flesh
you lift into the air,
not the mirror's flat image
waiting to catch you
off-guard regardless of
your pose.

The house you find

yourself wandering in
is the home of your life,
both new and familiar.
Each doorknob, each knick-knack uncanny yet true.
The child-fingers alive
inside your hands
remember each shape.

You see your mother
—immutably dead—
stir and smile. Her lips
defy all law to form
a sound so longed for, so clear
it disappears. What rises
from your body at waking
is simply her voice
speaking a word
she chose at your birth,
breathing out
your name.

David Moolten

BEE

A bee has become trapped, colliding
With a window screen it can't bring
Itself to believe in—what with a full moon
And the torrid smell of honeysuckle
In the August grass. As if stung
A man feels his memory swell
With another night like this, only long ago
And thus far different, when his hand
Strayed from one breast of his wife
To the other like a bee between poppies
While a real bee skidded on the ceiling
With a muffled hum he mourns now
More than the idea of his wife moving on,
Of loss, of losing, of having lost.
To grasp her absence he must ransack himself
Like someone trying to stay awake
In order not to miss how much he misses
That other house in whose starlight
He saw a furious welt rise on his palm
Because he tried to free what seemed inconsequential
But alive. How often he has tried since
To let go of suffering. But details
Are the past—all that ever leaves him—
Tinier than grief, enough to breeze
Through the holes of that sieve
Like a window screen he calls perception.
Comfortably, unnoticed, they escape
Like wind or the breath of sleep, until one day
As he pops out the screens and screws in
The storm glass, he'll have his peace,
Which is the tranquility of total loss
When even the buzz of strained, old love
Will fade like summer into the small
Dry husk he sweeps from the sill.

RETURN OF THE ASTRONAUTS

You measured the earth
shimmying in its veil of interminable weather.
You brought back the moon's fabled *fromage*
and held it up for the maw
of crowds and whirring cameras.

Up there that pure, umbilical air
fed you whole nebulas of shift
and revelation. A black shadow
seeped through your visor
as if to say: *Welcome,*
you have arrived at where you were going.
I was beginning to miss you.

So what the hell are you doing now holding up that gold card on TV?
We mustn't leave home
without it, you say.

O astronauts of the one true evening star,
how seldom I think of you, how seldom
and always
on a night like this one,
when the Montclair Plaza Mall waxes full,
when wallets slip out of pockets
and purses open,
and each one of us holds in his hand,
as you have shown us,
this promised number like a destination,
like a prayer to God
traveling
through a glittering heaven.

A LITTLE SHUT-EYE

What a relief it would be! No more greasing up
for the dawn rodeo, inspecting of vital signs
for the souvenir ticket stub that means
this life to me. I could doze
till donuts or turnips are served, all the while
dreamily confident, confidently dreaming that I was
taking part in some clandestine commencing
of tall events. I yawn and a Senator sharpens
the gnawed nub of his pencil. I fluff
my pillow and a secret, life-saving serum is
unearthed in an airport bathroom. I roll over
and shut my eyes . . . You get the picture.
I have discovered one has to be careful. One has to walk
with eyes open through a final backyard of ultimate fire
in which one's neighbor stews a questionable broth,
and his wife struts over, red hot ember that she is,
her heart unbuttoned, unclenched
at this altitude known for its touching nosebleeds
and avalanches. At least that's how
the mystics of old Lithuania explained it to me,
tired mystics catnapping after a hard day's work
in their lofty, ergodynamically designed coffins.
"Even asleep we partake in the becoming of the world,"
Milosz said, and I knew then
it was in my best interest to believe this rustic saying.
I threw another one of those handy, machine-tooled
quilts over my knees, ready
for whatever would happen next.

WHY WE NEED POETRY

Everyone else is in bed, it being, after all,
 three in the morning, and you can hear
 how quiet the house has become each time
 you pause in the conversation you are having
 with your close friend to take a bite
 of your sandwich. Is it getting the wallpaper
 around you in the kitchen up at last
 that makes cucumbers and white bread, the only
 things you could find to eat, taste so good,
 or is it the satisfaction of having discovered
 a project that could carry the two of you
 into this moment made for nobody else?
 Either way, you're here in the pleasure
 of the tongue, which continues after
 you've finished your sandwich, for now
 you are savoring the talk alone, how
 by staring at the band of fluorescent light
 over the sink or the pattern you hadn't
 noticed in the wallpaper, you can see
 where the sentence you've started, line
 by line, should go. Only love could lead you
 to think this way, or to care so little
 about how you speak, you end up saying
 what you care most about exactly right,
 each small allusion growing larger
 in the light of your friend's eye.
 And when the light itself grows larger,
 it's not the next day coming through the windows
 of that redone kitchen, but you,
 changed by your hunger for the words
 you listen to and speak, their taste
 which you can never get enough of.

THE PUPPY

From down the road, starting up
 and stopping once more, the sound
 of a puppy on a chain who has not yet
 discovered he will spend his life there.
 Foolish dog, to forget where he is
 and wander until he feels the collar
 close fast around his throat, then cry
 all over again about the little space
 in which he finds himself. Soon,
 when there is no grass left in it
 and he understands it is all he has,
 he will snarl and bark whenever
 he senses a threat to it.
 Who would believe this small
 sorrow could lead to such fury
 no one would ever come near him?

WIND

I remember learning to whistle
 at the dark windowpane of the barn
 thinking cobwebs might be like crystal
 waiting to shiver in the spent joy
 of the first wind under my control,
 like the primal anvil of God ringing
 through the bulging universe,
 to capture the brief attention of girl or taxi.

How many birds have cleft the air
 and come to rest under such a window,
 the delicate blue of the dove's closed lids
 like lentils in abbey kitchens
 and the four rose tines of its feet
 the color of pursed lips working
 in the ovoid trying silly face
 pouring out mirth and rue
 before its decline from freckle
 to age spot to lichen, awaiting the altered breath
 that would change the mouth, face, day.

They tell me when monks give up their diaries
 a wind sweeps through their bodies,
 as when Gwen Huffel signed away
 her pony, her albums, her bracelets
 and another blue got into her eyes
 rinsed like a fuller's cloth
 in the maund of the day-white lineaments spread
 on the spartan sea of her bed.
 These are the great winds. I was just trying to whistle

with blown cheeks and troughed tongue,
 like a long-distance runner among brown bags at the finish,
 or my grandfather breaking the hearts of Clevedon in 1896—"
 . . . a most diverting performance," the *Clarion* said—

or like birds that crash into barn windows,
 wishing to light in some dark interior,
 and rarely die at the foot of stained-glass windows.

Lions and dogs cannot whistle, only small birds.
 And we, who have this difference from animals, and walk
 slightly abandoned by ourselves,
 like Narcissus at the clear pond's edge,
 watching his lips, not his lashes,
 who died with his hands to his mouth
 of the unrequiting echo.

WATCHING A MURDER MYSTERY ON TV

I would not sit down to eat if I were not hungry.
 I would not lie down to sleep if I were not tired.
 But I watch a story unfold that does not interest me
 after the day has scattered us so far.

Like the corpse on the rug I lie in bed,
 my legs and arms at rest, my eyes wide open.
 It is your presence here beside me, against the
 narrative of death, that feeds the mystery.

Tomorrow we will wake against each other,
 the birds singing, the moths heading home,
 and we will arise to another day without clues,
 swathed in a lack of credibility.

And then we will take the side streets home
 and settle down once more to the mystery.
 The ads come on, and we talk of the likely suspects
 stirred by the prospects of a sweeter life.

Often I start to drift away before the last discovery,
 when all the evidence points to only one.
 I snap the light on my table before that revelation,
 turn on my side toward you, and fall asleep.

PARTNERS

1.
I like sleeping with the old table leg
close beside me under the covers in bed.
It's so placid, still and sturdy
in its slumber. It tolerates my knee
hooked over its finely lathed middle
and the way our ankles and feet
couple beneath the blanket.

Without attention or liberty (unlike
window or mirror), it withdraws wholly
and satisfactorily into the tight
oak of its own parameters.

Hardly restless, it never resists
itself or cants recitations to maker
or scholars. Its respiration is a lasting
lullaby, more predictable than my breath,
its heart less phantom, more upholding
than my heart.

During winter snows, I seek it,
I cradle it to my bed, I tuck it.
We somnia close, belly to belly
all through the night of the night.

2.
I like sleeping with great-uncle's
sea-crusted rope. I wind it in the familiar
route up my legs, round my waist, between
my breasts, a repeated necklace.

My sleep composes to its spirals,
follows its blind underwater passages,
the lines of its many past knots
loosened and lost.

The light of its fragrant coils
is the silver of its lovely residue:
dried spittle, fish flakes, moon oil.

With its head-end like a thumb
stuck in my mouth in the dark, subsumed,
I suck the salt-jack of its prehistoric
waves and currents.

3.
I take the carefully tuned guitar along
to sleep with me at night. Wrought
below the frets with ivory crescent moons
and their ebony crescent shadows,
it reclines best on its back, keeping
to its own pillow, keys resting
against the fringed satin.

With a mere accidental brush of my hand
across the center of its nakedness
in the dark, I feel the two of us
and the entire bed, springs and boards alike,
become a humming, six-stringed doxology.

The guitar surrounds a hollowness
as desperate as my sleep inside
its framework, as immeasurable as the night
inside its boundaries, as possible
as any truth inside its fabrication,
and sings the same.

PARALLEL UNIVERSES

There is one eye
above winter and one eye below one
eye for the moon sickle
at the bottom
of the well
one ear
in the peal before the casting

of the bell one hand to gather
 stellar
seeds at the bottom
 of the bottomless
 one ice tongue to lick
 the sickle ear shining
 like winter
in a crescent sky one thread
 of spider peeling
through a bottomless blue
 spring one sun sewn inside
 the green heart
of a bitter pear one sown seed
 threading the blue eye of a green
needle on mouth against
 the bell
of one sickled pear one breath of one lover's
 word against one ear one theory
 for ice
sickles one philosophy
 for cellar seeds
one gospel for the breath
 of sickle roots
 one lover's eye above one casting
stellar hand below
 one cellar spider
of gospel within one gathering
 one eye
for the green stained root tips
 of a spring
 moon one star seed
for the bitter bottom of the heart
one tongue threading through

REMEMBERING THE PRESENT TENSE

Before I was a ghost, I was born.
This event was continuous—as the separating
and peeling away of beetle and barnacle
shells, birch-leaf and curl-leaf from the sun
is continuous, as the unraveling of sage,
salt cedar and thrasher from the day
is continuous.

I was born a ghost. There were no
boundaries between me and the fragrances
of wild grape and licorice. The light
of firefly, fox eye, dropseed, candelabra
tree, all entered me freely. I gazed myself
without shape or name right into the hard
glass monocle of the moon, descended bodiless
through water into the fibrillating black
dollop of tadpole. I penetrated the boll
of the buckbrush, merged with the thump
of the bushtit. In one sudden opening
of layered clouds, I became all the moments
in a moment of summer night.

I was a ghost forever before I was born,
bearing in the presence of what was to come
the entirety of everything that had been—all past
holy distance and data of now held in the ovary
of the great-granddaughter of a son's unborn son.

When I was born into death,
I was a living ghost, being the only spirit
of fingers, the sole shock and rushing
spell of river litany, the animus of ponder
and strain. I was the abstraction
of my lips against his, the whimper
of longing, the revenant of hope. Reborn
and reborn, I was over and over the savage
soul of slaughter and consume.

I was born becoming the beginning

of a ghost dying. This finality was continuous—
the collapse of thunder into shingles
of rain merging into cactus canyons falling
into the gray claret of evening into the hollow
breath of the mud swallow disappearing
into the hall yard of night into curse
and its only other vanishing whole and powerful
together into their emergence.

THE IMMORTAL SOUL

It longs for the spine-shudder
coming with an October persimmon
sucked clear to the seed. Legs,
thighs wound together in bed
mean everything to it.

It craves pipe and whistle
music played in neon reflections
on night rivers, seeks cello sounds
inside tangled sycamore shadows
at dusk. It falls-in with the confusion
of waxwings and red ash disappearing
and emerging together in shifting
self-definitions of their own making.
The poverty of its isolation
is the royal totality of a crow
heard once at dawn calling
across the horizon.

Its first five ways are the first
five fragrances of bog and booth
willow, beaked sedge, blue clover,
blue-grasses, encountered in the first
thaw of spring. The ten directions
of its faith are its two hands spread
before a blue-yellow flame burning
in the snow. The ways of its passion
are all the directions revealed by wet,

white needles in a pine forest
straining through river fog.

It perceives the core of its name
as a wheel held by the hands, turned
full circle one way, then the other,
the range of its dominion as a wheel
spinning water, a rattling mill
wheeling wind, prophecy spinning
a fate, earth spinning the wheeling
properties of night.

Its most jolting connection to God
is head-first off rocks down
into the pummeling pressure and sudden
suffocation of a cold surf.
Its most complete connection to God
is its naked feet cradled and kissed
by the most loved of lovers.

And when the voice of the one
lover is at its ear whispering
devotion and possession, telling
truthfully of such fictions, the soul
then believes with all of its body
in its own immortality.

About Our Contributors

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Poetry Northwest Prize Awards, 1996

MACLEOD-GROBE PRIZE: \$500

Cathleen Calbert for Two Poems (Spring 1995)
and Lynne Kuderko for Three Poems (Spring 1995)

BULLIS-KIZER PRIZE: \$200

Kimberly Swayze for Three Poems (Summer 1995)
and Four Poems (Autumn 1995)

THEODORE ROETHKE PRIZE: \$200

Keith Ratzlaff for "*Die Winterreise*" (Winter 1995-96)

RICHARD HUGO PRIZE: \$200

Jesse Lee Kercheval for Four Poems (Autumn 1995)

