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NORTHWEST

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POETRY NORTHWEST

AUTUMN 1997

Vicki Angel

Two Poems

THE FRAGRANCE OF SPEECH

Sometimes they fall like manna
in the desert on the sixth day
when the food landed lazily
as gossamer and they gathered it
in double portion, extra for the Sabbath
when they could not gather. Or quietly,
as migrating quail blanketing a fog-lined field.
Sometimes words accumulate like that.

Or in a sudden downpour, pellets hard
and fast as bullets. They fill the ditch in seconds, fill
the hole in the dark garden that once held
the moon's light, they push out the moon's light
and in the morning a rainbow skims
the oil slicked puddle — shimmers the puddle.

In the beginning, there was a word.
A few dark wings across an empty sky.
The Jews have a ceremony called *havdalah*
to end the Sabbath. It goes like this: Chant
and drink some wine. Hold your hands
beneath a candle, then away. Notice

how the light skips in waves and particles
across the pinkish half moons of the nails.
Smell the rosewater. Breathe deeply the clove.
Fragrance comes and goes like portions

of speech — transient as gossamer. Seeds spread
over fields seething with quail. We play. We laugh
and roam the earth barely conscious
it conceals a fire so hot and far away
we will never name it.

BABEL BUILDERS

They say blue beads ward off evil eyes,
that garlic dangling from a mirror
stays the skidded tire from the dark slick street.
Swing a lassoed chicken overhead, six times,
chant a blessing — it soaks up your transgressions
like a sponge. Sometimes I can't believe the folly
of my people. To think some smelly, bulbous root
could rouse a god from his heavy stupor.

And the same old dramas, the night flights
and flat bread. The same old king and his granite heart.
Tattered talk around starched white linen. It's the same
old story. Like cows at their cud, we regurgitate
what we can't swallow. My son, Vic, moves out of the house,
all facial hair and muscle. His brow, so like mine,
thick clouds above twin lakes. He lugs box
after box of what he's gathered to his life. The sweat
dots his head, soon it will weigh down
each fine dark hair. And I can't help myself,
I'm sad. Sweat, brows, it's the same

old story. When I was young my father
never spoke. I had to read the record in nightsweats
and digits etched into his arm like bird tracks in fresh snow.
Now, I'm older, he's a crow's caw. He never stops. Slithers
on his belly past stiff boots and harsh tongues,
from the barracks to the canteen where he squeezes
through a window, steals two rotten spuds. His comrades,

caught, corralled,

abandoned to the snow. Four striped uniforms
in a heap on the ground. The same old story. And the same old
tents — year after year, the feigned trek across the desert.
But this is Seattle, not the Sinai! And we're not nomads
anymore. Still, we huddle in our huts celebrating Solomon
who said, *habel habalim hakol habel*, which translates loosely
into everything is vapor. Vapor! The breath you barely see
on that first fall day when you babble, and the air is just cold

enough to hold
the damp steam of speech that is all of what we are.

Ronald Wallace

ART

How you want to stay back a bit
from the action, the art
inhering in the commonplace,
after all — the sweat on the actors'
faces, the Vesuvius of saliva
that sprays from the soprano's
mouth, the elephantine thump
of even the most graceful plie
& pirouette — that, up close and
personal, appears just as
what it is: hard work, years
of practice and expertise.

How the stage lights soften
the faces of the audience,
the old song and dance
of dailiness washed away.
How the world that has aged
and tarnished, slipped on its
fissures and faults, sits back
and, rapt, relaxes. How it
sings and leaps and shines!

WHEN YOU WATCHED ME THROUGH THE CAMERA'S EYE

I was hesitant at first,
rigid as my door frame and smiling
with too many teeth. You told me
each photo must make its own story
and you cupped the camera in your hands
as tenderly as a woman's face.
The shutter made little more noise than a wink.
You promised to make me beautiful
if I gave myself wholly
to the lens. You told me to imagine my bones,
to think of loss, to splay flat on the ground
like a fallen star.

Later you placed my image
on a computer screen, cinched my waist narrow
as a sigh, brushed my skin
clean of indecision. If the sky was dull
you added uprooted trees, crashing planes,
clouds in any shade of euphoria,
all the effects of a natural disaster breaking
around me while I stared solemnly ahead. I was
the woman in the cream satin dress; I was naked,
the dress flowering at my ankles.
When you finished, I didn't know
this woman, the one carved
into the red sand like a shaft of light,
the one who loved the photographer.

THE SIDESHOW CHILDREN

We begin, where we finished
last year, or maybe someplace in the middle. No
matter. The teenage boy is still
all embarrassed grin and acne, red from scrubbing.
He can stretch his skin, his face and neck,
like layers of thin light
into an origami of shapes. He'll do so
for a sideways glance, a twist of shiny, narrow hips
from any pretty girl in the crowd.
Another boy blushes head to toe
all the colors of the sea. The brothers
and sisters with the split faces of cats
have learned to growl, have grown their hair to manes
as reckless and tangled as fields of wild flowers.

At an unseen signal from the sky, a girl
sullen and fine-boned, drops to all four
scaled legs, her neck and spine rigid, a hiss barely
skimming the night. All hunger. It's wrong,
I tell my lover, he who's always, nearly
always on the slivered edge of leaving
his first family. But we go on watching the toddler
deftly swallow a sword's blade
taller than himself, the tiny bat-winged twins
hovering like stars just beyond our reach,
the girl who weeps roses
and orchids, the velvet petals
circling her gently as a shroud.

The man who keeps them, *all for love*,
he says, *the damaged and the thrown-away*, he hardly
makes enough in these small towns to buy
the air he's breathing. *And the cities,*
they stopped believing long ago
in miracles, in retribution and forgiveness.
And see. No bars here. The only cages

*live in the flat eyes of the crowds.
The children can go anytime, stay anytime.
They almost always stay.*

And I throw my shiny hair over
my lover's shoulder. I move my hips like water
against his, and I go on watching the children, not
with horror or even with tenderness, but for this
moment when my glass hand finally loosens
in his, when the taste of this longing, red
and salty as blood, beats like thunder
at the back of my throat.

WHAT GETS LEFT BEHIND

—(for C.T. Siegel)

The glove's mate, perhaps, or whole families
of broken-spined umbrellas; a carpet, a chair lost
or gained in one or another move; an entire head
of hair nestled intricately as spider webs
in years of brushes. This and more is boxed, packed
off to Good Will or the trash. This is what
Tsivia told me: in the end

we are remembered by the collections we leave others
to dispose of. Tsivia was hoarder of boxes
and linen scraps, keeper of chipped
ceramic animals, of a lifetime's worth
of clothing in multiple sizes of too small.

House-bound for years,
she said she couldn't breathe
in public; the bus stop, the market, too cluttered
with the unfamiliar hands of strangers. The combined
staccato of so many hearts beating
simultaneously broke her rhythm for days,
left her barely able to step, to speak.

I don't remember, wasn't alive, when she lost

her battle with open air — when her fear became
the light outside the window and the world moved indoors,
the comfortable line of kitchen to den, the flickering rose
of the television.

This is what Tsivia left me:
the changes of seasons reflected in our shadows
against the unbroken white
of the walls, lengthening to summer
and dwindling again. The crusts we saved
for the birds. How we threw the bread in great handfuls
from the screened porch door —
the spring bringing throngs of bright cardinals and robins,

winter reserved the occasional crow, for generations
of brown sparrows nesting in the rafters
of the garage, year after year.
Neither adventurous nor lovely,
but a constant, clamorous promise against
the whitest snow — the grateful flurry of those wings.

TRANSFORMATIONS

I can't remember when they began.
The changes. The old Buick
at the curb is the hippopotamus
I shaped from clay when I was a senior
in high school, the only decent work
I made in that forgettable class. The white towel
on the neighbor's line is a snowy owl
shorn from some sea
of ice and salt. A poem
is painted across the hot sky
in gleaming L.A.
colors — smog, dust, the rain
of starlight. All changed
in a cavern of signs and words, echoes
floating on the fallen tides of memory,
ink smeared across the wet fields
of napkins, ink blurred
to nothing I can remember.

But I remember islands
of cottonwoods drifting in oceans of wheat, the white tufts
caught on fences and the rippling backs
of cattle swimming in the deep
pools of shade. And my friend
the lawyer, who took me in that last year
when nearly everyone I knew had given up
on me. He told me any fool can graduate
and I proved him right. He created
in me the possibility of something
better than those days pruning hops
in the hard winds of Moxee, Sunnyside,
those hot nights sweating atop a jitney, stacking
wooden pallets decades high when everything was lost
but the hours and the dreaming
not of loss but what I could find
in the flames of my own hands.

LOST POEMS

Out of the stupidity, scrawled
on the crumpled backs of envelopes
while swerving down the crowded bed of the freeway. Scribbled
on circulars, credit card applications, fliers —
LAWN CARE RETIREMENT INCOME PEDICURES
IN YOUR OWN HOME! Because of forgotten notebooks,
pens run dry, broken pencils, the empty well
of memory. Creased in the melting edges of paper
plates, smeared with the residue of baked
beans, potato salad, the sweet juice
of barbecued ribs. Scratched in sand with a stick,
in black ink on the sweating palm
of my left hand. In the afterimages
of sparklers on the Fourth of July. In the dust
of boredom on top of the bureau, on the blank page
of grocery sacks, across the numbered days
on the desk calendar. In the back
of the closet, in the deep pockets
of suits I haven't worn
in years. Blooming above the embossed flowers
of wedding invitations and funeral
notices, dripping down the rusty face
of the moon. Thrown out in conversations
with myself. Lost in the back seat
of the Honda, between the cushions
of the red velvet couch, at the sagging bottom
of the waste basket. Smudged, water-spotted, bent,
torn, spindled, mutilated, burnt
with the oak's fallen leaves. Sprayed
on the side of an underpass, carved across ELVIS
LIVES on the damp wall
in the Men's Room in the Buckaroo
Tavern. Crushed with egg shells, searching
on my hands and knees through coffee grounds
and soggy tea bags, crying again over spilt milk;
stained, soaked, colored outside the lines, ripped
from the belly of the past, tossed
aside by mistake, lack of confidence,

fear, love, hate: the flashing words
lightning wrote, thunder's huge voice, the cries
of rain, soft murmurs of snow, the cracking voice
of ice suddenly recalled
like the lyrics of those old hymns
I sang as a boy, running my finger carefully
along the text, in the basement
of the enduring Presbyterian Church.

BLOCK

It's like swimming through
the white silence
of the page without leaving
a splash or a ripple, sinking
for the third or fifth or hundredth
time toward the gravity
of the sandy floor
where ideas hide
like those colored fish — ribbon
eels, yellowtails —
blending into the living
stone of the coral
reef on the picture
postcard from Cozumel. I want to
make waves, an ocean of whitecaps,
blue curls surfers
wait a lifetime for. I want to stir
the cauldron, add the bite
of serpent's tongue, tooth
of dragon, eye of newt, cast
a net of images — the sky's
frozen wings, the open mouth
of the wind — a woven raft of words,
intricate and buoyant as silk
spun from an impenetrable center,
to hold me up, and carry me
to the lush, green shore.

James Harms

LOS ANGELES, THE ANGELS

Doves love a dying palm. They nestle in the loud fronds. They hum
and shiver. The way days end here: no click; no door sealing in the
light.

The way dusk enters the room and embitters it; the way
the paint absorbs its shadows, the skin absorbing stares.

I hear you and I hate it. I hate hearing your voice in the leaves
as I sand down the bureau; I drag out the furniture, drag it out
onto the driveway but still, *How have you come so far
without belief?* I rake the yard to muffle your voice.

Evening is slithering toward me, and behind it, believe me,
the cold. Night is a chance to see the stars as they were
when Greeks in their shifts and leather slippers, their
gruesome beards sandy and caked with salt— before turning
toward each other to sleep — listened, terrified, to the laughter
breaking with the waves, the slim sheet of water drawing close.

And their dreams were worn as singlets in the next day's race,
the cloth of sleep sewn into waking, the long day of sleep.
Because they knew, as I have chosen not to— each turn at the wheel
a chance to drive my purchases and children to a clear spot
on the hillside — they knew what we would become: old thieves
in beaten-up cars, idling at the signals, skin going bad in the sun.

Night is a wind blowing away the light, which streaks and burns
on its way west. Night is an empty lung, and here's the moon:
the armoire mounts a broken dresser; the lawn grows plastic chairs.
*How can I forgive you? How have you come so far? I rake
the dark shards from the grass, your voice in pieces, so far, belief.*

THE NUMBER OF DOORS

I am always opening the secret doors of buildings
the neglected, painted-over portals
the ones they do not want you to see behind

the door frame part of the rococo wallpaper
the keyhole disguised as a plug —
even oaken doors, numbers lightly embossed

out of order, unsupervised, opening to utilities
telephone intestines, part of nothing plumb, straight
or true. Some impulse of design moves me.

I am always rewarded by the slatted, wobbly listing of
the souls of buildings: all Hitchcock camera angles
the real thing next to the not real thing

discovering the chipped, 1920 terra cotta brick, the paint
splattered work pants, and once, a battered *Playboy*
lunchbucket with "Gus" engraved on the side.

I want to see the guts in these grand excavations
lighting often a bulb and exposed wire, especially
institutions of learning, especially

higher learning, all the molding and veneer.
Perhaps it is because no father ever showed me
the wonder of lumber or five-eighths fittings

and the songs of tools and carpentry were as foreign
as my mother's instructions of gloves and stillness
as the mumblings of my father's hangover sleep.

Even so I am rarely embarrassed, unsure of my place, caught
by someone saying "Hey, elevator's that way" or "Miss,
restroom's down the hall..."

voice trailing off like the blinking light of the insane's
paddywagon they imagine whirling me away like their
own ditzzy Aunt Shirley.

Peeking and prodding I am just one more crazy woman
they add to the list, shaking their heads like the palm
of a child playing Parchesi. The dice in her hand

leading me to my next move like that woman in the wall
who lived in secret for four years, hidden in the house
of her childhood like a knickknack.

That woman: hair firecrackers, eyes dimmed
was high priestess to my religion, she said: "It was always
my home," as they led her away.

All her friends and family behind pine doors, behind
the granite and marble doors of mausoleums, behind all
that loss she survived, opening her first days.

She reminds me of Cicero, his famous dream, demanding
an infinite universe. He said, even if you got
to the end, what was on the other side?

Because he could imagine the other side of a door
he knew the universe was endless. Think of him thinking
always what was on the other side.

There will always be doors unopened, sealed by rainwater,
primed into background, neglected as assembly instructions,
the shy child in the family of achievers.

Hidden as unlisted numbers, the fossil
in the mesozoic wave. These are the ones passed over
as Britons in blitzkrieg air raids

as the angel of death over certain families in Egypt,
as a woman in a wall. And if locked, I am getting better
at jiggling the handle just so —

PHILIUM

The telephone number you give the guy in the bar.
The age at which he first had sex he tells you.
The number of partners.
Your Aunt Florence's current age.
Any feasibility study: philium.

Those missing in action in the official report.
Those deemed worthy of rescue.
The number of minutes to determine this.
The Pentagon is stuffed with philium.

When Abraham asked God to spare Sodom
if there were only a thousand good men
or only one hundred or only ten
or only a philium of good men
God listened to philium.

Philium piles up like the inches of snow
your grandfather shovelled
in his youthful winters —
at philium below philium —
increasing each time he tells you
and the number of times you tell
someone else he has told this story

like the leagues of loch ness
because one lead equals two babies
and the length of its body
because three shadows mean six monsters
And the shadow of its head
and two Geiger needles chart radiation
and the body of evidence
and prehistoric births tourist attraction
level of radiation in milk
and three mothers file reports and two laws
mercury level in mackerel
beget more lawsuits and six lawyers
amount of lead in Absopure

equals one settlement and three mackerel
toxins percentage in the river spawn
regulations and two fisheries spell
because one test means dead fish
jobs and three toxins means no monsters
because six dorsals means prehistoric
double helix no jobs and no shadow means
no babies and one word means

when river and shadow and word
are one: philium.

THE NUMBER OF APPLES

must explain those snow apples
the first you ever saw
unsprayed
not grocery store boxed
the round in square holes.
The sad ones hanging on
or who had fallen
not to bushels and bakers' palms
but to earth
tiny whorls in the back orchard
where you'd never seen anything
so pale and pockmarked.
The tender worm holes
like brown haloes
like the soft spot on your baby sister's head
like the vaccination orb
on your older sister's arm
before you knew the words:
virus, decay.

And besides the gaudy Golden Delicious
upright Jonathan Smith
and the myths
the number of apples
is here to explain

these bruised ones
embracing all of its fruit
loving the very strangeness like a curator
holding onto the stems
of these gnarled, unharvested ones
suspended and celestial
like undiscovered planets
that have nothing to do
with earth or worms.

Jesse Lee Kercheval

LET THE BODY DO ITS OWN WORK

Put it away — the arms,
the legs you soaped
this morning in the bath,
the whole world,
that damp communal shower.
Awake, we are
cartographers who've lost
our box of maps,
mathematicians before zeros.

Asleep, we do not need
these forms of witness,
higgledy-piggledy surveys,
news of the planet,
that were never enough.
What did they teach us?
No more than a baby hears
through a keyhole,
than a child knows of life
beyond summer vacation.
We need, like dogs at dusk,
to dream of teeth,
of bones hidden in a place
only sleep can find.

By day, we miss
not just the train
but the station, the whistles,
the white hands waving,
fingers frantic.
Time, that velvet rope,
ties us down. Now
our eyes begin to droop,
to search the dark
for all we've lost —
mother, baby, husband,
that old left glove,
riches enough
to recreate the grandeur
that was Rome.

Sleep, I promise,
can bring them all back.
Close your eyes and say
your prayers, count
dimes, teacups, tulips,
fingers. Say,
here I am. Take me.

Gary Fincke

LOSSES

After his stroke, Ben Barnhart
Could not recognize a song.
Six hundred wedding receptions
He'd sung at, crooning "Blue Moon"
And "Earth Angel" as often
As the address of the house
He found, once, blindfolded, sensing
The length of seven blocks through
The drift of his car in neutral,
Turning between two curbs, parking
One foot, four inches, hand-measured,
From his Frank Sinatra mailbox.
He didn't know "Sincerely"
Or "The Way You Look Tonight"
He blinked and wept like the fathers
Of brides, astonished at the end
Of something, failing the test
Of "Happy Birthday" the way
Another set of victims
Loses the use of numbers,
Not knowing what lies between
Three and five or the total
For two plus two, each of them
Puzzled by the plain and simple
Like my mother repeating,
"Count your blessings" while she swallowed
Six kinds of medicines, able
To sum the good things, writing them
On my unused high school tablets,
A map of Pennsylvania
On each of thirty-six covers
Because I would not write in them,
Certain I'd forget nothing
I heard in a thousand lectures,
Since what mattered surely stayed,
All of it said so often
I couldn't lose it if I tried.

Floyd Skloot

SINCE THE ACCIDENT

Anomia — the inability to name objects, is
caused by injury to the inferior frontal gyrus.
—The Merck Manual

Ah this, this is the thing you might pour
soup in to heat up, or water for tea.
First you have to light the flame on the box
where people cook. Those? They slip on your sox
and then you have to bend and tie them tight.
Well, with those on the lower part of your
arm, of course. Yes. A part of the body,
sure enough, you can also count with them.
Fingers? If you say so. That could be right.
I know what is happening. This notebook,
see, I draw pictures of things and then look
them up when I get stuck. It's a real shame,
but this is how I have been, day and night,
since the accident. I just lost the names
of everything. Except for butterflies,
which is what I do not understand. Why?
Nelson's Hairstreak, Swallowtail or the Bay
Checkerspot. No problem. Wood Nymph, Pine White,
the Northern Blue in a field of lupine,
California Sister — the names come out fine.
Show me a specimen; I can tell you
what it is without thinking. But to say
ankle? That is something I could not do
if you asked me to. I cannot do it.
A blank. I did? Maybe by accident,
or how I breathe. The way I still can cry.

Martha Silano

JUST DON'T WRITE ANY POEMS ABOUT
NIAGARA FALLS

—Richard Hugo

Nobody cares it's raining where you are.
Nobody wants to know a cumulonimbus
floats by your house like a sneezing frog. Keep it to yourself.

Keep too your mother's mother's labored-over
pansies — ivory petals bowing like sheets
on a pulley clothesline, morning glories

strangling your will as innocently and guilelessly
as the sky. We've already read the one about
the hamster in the foxglove, so we won't

be alarmed when you tell us it turned out
to be a baby possum, nor will we stick around
for your *splendid marsupial triumphant evolution*

song. Nobody cares, in other words, about your childhood —
gargantuan zucchinis, ailing mimosas,
the day your father sliced your beachball

with his pocket knife when it crushed a struggling
tomato; Snooper and Peek, Ashes and Butch;
your various hunches as to the origins

of a large, rectangular-with-round-depression
rock, perfect birdbath for grackles and starlings:
Lenape bed pan, meteor, Yapese dime.

If we have to read one more time about your return to Grove Ave.
in the spring of '95, finding your bubble-gum-pink-and-ever-
lintful hyacinth choking beneath the vent for the dryer

or imagine your breaking voice as you grope
to describe the stranger among your Uncle Peter's

wrapped-in-the-Kansas-City-Star-and-carried-from-
Tightwad-Missouri-

comfrey (comfrey which proceeded to cover the entire yard);
if you then not so surreptitiously segue into tales of two-foot snows
cushioning your "N"s (*Needs Improvement*; you got them

in "Follows Directions"); stroke, in other words,
that tiniest violin of a weatherful, kittenful, puppyful
great vanished youth grandmother-inspired yarn

and we're cursing you. In your next life
you'll be the maintenance guy at Niagara Falls
in ticking coveralls, name embroidered

above your heart — the one in charge
of the Giant Valve, releasing pressure
for newlyweds and tourists, ensuring water flows

at a rate they can gush at. And when they've finished
(*what a beautiful day the day we met...*)
I'm so glad your grandma let slip your passion

for miniature poodles...Snuggles would love this place!
Did I ever tell you I came here as a child...?)
when they want to know if it's worth springing

for a valentine tub or a boat ride
to Cave of the Winds and the trilobite wall,
you'll be the one they turn to for advice.

THE WISHING FLOOR

—In a Belgrade hotel elevator:
PUSH BUTTON FOR WISHING FLOOR

One night the ex drops by.
Hadn't intended to, mustn't again
and yet, whatever, happened to be in town,
happened to drive by, see a light on and knock,
could not — she swears it — could not help herself.
You know the story.
The farthest fixed point in the night sky
blinks twice.
Hello and how *long*? And so on.
Are you *busy*? And so forth.
She stands there, steps in, stands there.
They eat and they talk, eat, talk,
she touches the salt,
he examines a fork.
One thing and another.
She unbuttons her blouse,
slips out of her skirt. Shouldn't,
of course, mustn't again, but this time
at the right wrong moment one thinks, Why not?
One thinks, This once.
A quarter moon moves over Grand National Bank.
They shouldn't, of course, mustn't
again — it's agreed.
Well, pass a month, pass a week
and one night he's at home in New Glarus.
She's at work in Grand Forks and she
wishes they'd never met.
He wishes he'd never been born.
She sharpens a pencil, he opens a drawer.
A blue truck stalls with a roll of linoleum.

RICHARD NEED HIS PANTS TOOK IN. TO LONG
FOR HIM BY MONDAY.

Give it over, she said.
He gave her the note and he stood there.
My *drink*, she said. My drink.
He put his Coke down,
set the pants aside,
put her own Coke down,
dropped his jacket, sat.
Okay, she said.
So, alright, he'd leave the pants
at his mother's with the note pinned on.
She went over it with him, reviewed it
for the eighty-ninth time —
the good pants she'd picked up
for cheaply with a built-in belt, Richard, at the front
door so leave them nice, now, Richard,
please. (honestly)
She folded the note, sharpened the crease,
handed it back.
Dirty booth, chipped plate, she said.
Then he promised her again, his intended, yes,
he'd leave them off for certain, pick them up for sure.
Face like a slapped ass, Jesus,
what's eating *you*, she asked, huh?
And as morning turned to noon they leaned
forward and bent over their colas together.
Little ice, she said.
Short straws.

William Aiken

THE ROOM

Sometimes it happens you lose a child forever,
and you have to design a smaller life,
one of the corners unapproachable,
the way they shut an upper room in older houses
and you don't go there anymore
although when you were young you used to play there.

It does not mean you have to sell the house.
It does not mean the room does not exist —
only that everything is so streaked now
you do not hang the flags again.

No one can say what happened in that room to change it for you,
a room drained of sunlight,
like the one in *Great Expectations*,
but you always walk with the knowledge
that the further off you are
the better chance it has.

The door will not fly open and feet come running.

This will be true of all your life,
a closet gone to emptiness,
a bed gone to wideness,
a kitchen that does not ring.

It is not like a child who dies,
a staircase filled no longer with soft, slippared descents;
nothing is buried alive up there,
so do not think you can burst through that door one day
and shake things out.
You cannot paint the room
or wash the windows
or paper the walls.

It is just a vacancy.
There is something worse than death.
There is thinking nothing of yourself.

It is just a room that is closed to you forever,
So pretend your architect did not design it,
That your house has not four
But three rooms upstairs.
You see how easy it is?
how it will cut down on the wandering?

Wesley McNair

OLD GUYS

Driving beyond a turn in the mist
of a certain morning, you'll find them
beside a men-at-work sign,
standing around with their caps on
like penguins, all bellies and bills.
They'll be watching what the yellow truck
is doing and how. Old guys know trucks,
having spent days on their backs under them
or cars. You've seen the grey face
of the garage mechanic lying on his pallet, old
before his time, and the gray, as he turns
his wrench looking up through the smoke
of his cigarette, around the pupil
of his eye. This comes from concentrating
on things the rest of us refuse
to be bothered with, like the thickening
line of dirt in front of the janitor's
push broom as he goes down the hall, or the same
ten eyelets inspector number four checks
on the shoe, or the box after box
the newspaper man brings to a stop
in the morning dark outside the window
of his car. Becoming expert in such details
is what has made the retired old guy
behind the shopping cart at the discount store
appear so lost. Beside him his large wife,
who's come through poverty and starvation

of feeling, hungry for promises of more
for less, knows just where she is,
and where and who she is sitting by his side
a year or so later in the hospital
as he lies stunned by the failure of his heart
or lung. "Your father" is what she calls him,
wearing her permanent expression
of sadness, and the daughter, obese
and starved herself, calls him "Daddy,"
a child's word, crying for the tenderness
the two of them never knew. Nearby, her husband,
who resembles his father-in-law in spite
of his Elvis sideburns, doesn't say
even to himself what's going on inside him,
only grunts and stares as if the conversation
they were having concerned a missing bolt
or some extra job the higher-ups just gave him
because this is what you do if you're bound,
after an interminable, short life to be an old guy.

Philip Dacey

THRENODY

When I say goodbye to my mother,
who is losing her mind,
who knows me only enough
to ignore me, whose presence
before her is all transparency

(her hand, as it were, waves
in front of her and finds nothing —
I am cut into two, four, how many pieces?),

and adopt the mother
of language, mother tongue —
can a woman only adopt a child?
cannot a child adopt a woman,
a grown child, a woman of words?

immediately the language
is white-haired, benign,
the vowels smiling,
the consonants firm on my wrist,
like a guiding hand,

and I would crawl back
into her, this old woman,
as if to begin again,
as if to end
by beginning again,

for is she not always also young,
a maiden who yearns,
the language nothing if not gestation,
over and over again, the very crowning and cry
what keeps it young?

But how can I say goodbye
to my mother, I

who am the sentence in her mouth,
mad as it is,
who am merely the inflection of the one
nonsense word she has become,

who am a grammar rule,
abstract, imperious, adrift
all these many years,
to be fulfilled when she calls me down
to attend her dissolution,
to measure how far she has gone,
before she breaks me completely
into the significance
of her grave?

Len Roberts

Three Poems

CORRECTING THE LISP

With five marbles in my mouth
I began with Thou Shalt,
Thou Shalt Not,
reading for three years
the ten commandments
until I got the words
perfect,
the whish of w,
the kih of k,
Sister Ann Zita standing
for the daily hour
in the auditorium's dark,
listening to a lisp so bad
she couldn't understand
a word I said, the belt
a blur,
the bloody pad held
before my face,

boy looking up at a smile
to my right,
a frown to my left,
masks, I'd learn later
in life,
that people put on during
plays,
father mask of rage,
mother mask of blood,
my lips forming beneath
the repeating mask
for the black-winged nun
who clicked beads
and murmured prayer
while I went on and on,
Thou Shalt,
Thou Shalt Not,
teaching me sin,
teaching me how to say it.

THE BURNING HOURS

I'd sit for burning hours
in the kitchen
with the cool washcloth
on my forehead,
thinking of the enema
we'd eventually get to
on the bathroom floor,
the cleansing,
as my mother called it,
then the pillow on the couch,
the book, the blanket,
how they would not shout
that night because I was sick
upstairs
with a bad fever, him counting
his coins
and sipping beer, her scrubbing

her hands red in too-hot water
to get all the germs off the glasses
and dishes,
holding each spoon, knife and fork
to that dim Olmstead Street light
before setting them into the tray,
one
of their quiet footsteps on the stairs,
the door creak, the light felt
through closed lids,
the darkness again and that one's
descent,
the most I know of their love then,
now, father dead,
mother in madness, what's left —
the quietness of the knob turned,
the looking in
I did not dare open my eyes to see,
the utter dark with the door's closing
click
that seeped in and set me free.

DOING THE LAUNDRY

Having mastered the wool,
the cotton, the linen
cycles, then permanent
press and the delicate,
I dance
in the laundry room
when you're gone
off to work, our
son in school,
sorting the lights
from the darks
so they will not
run, just enough
bleach to remove
the stains from

the whites, I
whirl
to the spin cycle's
beat, lightly hum
to the dryer's roll,
bringing down
the three wicker baskets
from the three closets
of clothes,
singing a song
on the stairs
where the brass angel
stands and guards
our house, my thumb
rubbed across her face
and down her wings
no matter how full
my hands are,
no matter if I drop
a sock, a shirt, a bra,
wanting to kiss her lips
but finally knowing better
than to go too far,
suspended there a split second
with love overspilling my arms.

Robert Hunter Jones

RETURNING THE WOLF

The news all week in Boise has been the return of the wolf to the middle fork of the Salmon River — the River of No Return Wilderness — a government airlift from Alberta through the foggy skies of talkshow hype, threats from ranchers, the hysterical telling of a tale from northern Minnesota where Little Red Ridinghood has apparently been swallowed all over again. Last night I dreamt

I was running uphill from our childhood swimming hole, making tracks across the dunes to where the waves urged all night against one edge of the world. But the hill undid itself into a road above Coos Bay. A man in a school bus insisted I ride. We swerved

into traffic on the Hauptstrasse running through Salzburg to the train station. The wolf ran wild-eyed in front of us, trapped in traffic, slipping on a cold clear sheet of ice. I jumped from the bus and gathered her up. We were

caught in Coos Bay again, the hillsides scabby with clearcuts. I dodged through thickets of pickups and chip trucks, desperate for any unpaved chance at the hills. She ran beside me

now along a forest road above the vineyards at *Neustift am Walde*. In the woods near Vienna, where mythology made her all the world's target, I found myself familiar. "I know the way," I shouted. She threw me a glance, all wolf grin and steaming smile. Moonlight through the bare sycamore limbs cast down shapes from fairytales. The world blurred. We were in Salzburg again.

I held a compass out in front of her, showed the four directions. She swallowed me. I had them inside. All terror and desire, I dodged among headlights, felt my paws lose grip, and slid along my side into the Salzach. Water rushed from the world's mouth. I reached the other side and shed the river, running uphill beneath pines in the moonlight — no howl, now headlights, no buses —

alone.

Roberta Kozak

PIGEON

Downstairs, from the driveway, I can barely see her there in the corner, a knot of tar-colored feathers, head tucked like a dreamer's against her breast. Distance has a way of doing that, I think, washing the dishes this morning, waterlogged and waspish and wet to the elbows, watching her through the tiny, dime-sized prison window above the sink. She hasn't budged an inch from the sill for days, though it's September and seems far too late for nesting. I say *prison* because the martyrdom of what we used to call women's work never ceases—as dull as every funeral I've ever been to, slick with soap and grease and gristly crusts—stuck in the corners of the floor—that melt, alchemy of the kitchen, into fresh grease when you try with a sponge to brush them up. I remember my mother on her knees best. Distance has a way of doing that, distilling a person to the very self they'd like most

to forget. The squinty, pimply-faced, shameful one, though there's nothing shameful about work. *It has to be done*, Mother told me, a child of nine or ten aching on my knees beside her, clean rags and a can of Pledge wedged between my skinny hip and the bucket, her voice hollow from the strange, cave-like acoustics of the cabinet that reeked beneath the drain. Of course I couldn't wait to be free of it, of her. The last year, her last, when she'd scrub down the tubs or oven, she actually wore a Wilson Products respirator that my father fetched home from his office to keep the twin stinks of ammonia and bleach from weakening her more. She looked like one of those poor bastards in *Legends of the Fall*, staggering blindly through the moonscape of the gas. Prisoner of war. Of course my father never helped her. Of course my sisters and I were busy—as cold as a door, that word, closing by slow degrees its steel bars on everything—and nothing, I tell myself as I scour sour coffee from a cup, can forgive us now. Why does anyone stand for this? Even the pigeon there in its self-imposed pigeon-prison, preening her folded wings with her beak. Up close she's more purple than tar, and prettier, too, for all her craziness, for all she's patient to a fault with shit and lice and the dirt that blackens our lives in a way I'll never be. When I tap the glass, she blinks back at me with anxious eyes: red-rimmed, female, the eyes of my mother, whom I lost until I learned to work.

Christopher Howell

IF THE WORLD WERE GLASS

We'd all be windows for the silicone swallows to fly through or break their necks against, like the grosbeaks in Corvallis years ago. I'd be addressing vacant up-turned faces of the undergraduates and bonk! this lovely green and black corpse, wire-like toes askew, on the window ledge.

If the world were glass, some of us might be window ledges where pigeons would leave their little glass excreta like dirty beads and tormented solid glass jumpers agonize briefly before stepping out onto the shattering air, where peepers just as agonized would edge along for a clearer view of glass women in their gleamingly transparent glory.

Everything would be as it is if the world were glass. It would be difficult to actually see others, and hard to go home because of confused notions of the light, and distances magnified out of all those proportions by which we had hoped to live. Often a voice would crack or the heart collapse in heaps of tailings and ineffectual repair.

Often, in so much glare and music, we would not know where to turn for love or anything else, and our great heroes would be those who simply would not break.

D. Nurkse

Three Poems

RED-AND-SILVER SCHWINN

I would never learn.
She would never love me.

When I wriggled on that cruel seat
a blind force — perhaps hope —
smashed me into the sprinkler system.

Even when I wheeled it,
the bike jack-knifed.

It seemed the fall
was planned within me.

Polite with rage
I refused trainer wheels.

I carried the frame tenderly
over newly-sodded lawns.

Once it was my burden
there was nowhere we could not go.

THE HELLMAN'S JAR

Lucky sealed in a tarantula and a praying mantis.
He had reamed air-holes in the lid.

He invited me.
These are the Gods of War.

The insects ignored each other.
That, too, Lucky explained, was deep combat.

We stared and waited.
Sometimes we glanced furtively
at the kitchen clock.

The fighters stood enchanted,
camped in bodies that seemed immense,
gossamer legs arcing
with the contour of the glass.

Later, the question:
how to give them food and drink
without disturbing the trance of strategy?

Lucky blew in atomizer mist.
They would eat each other.

On the third day we woke.
The spider was still alive
immobile in its corner.

The praying mantis had vanished.

A good soldier, Lucky said.
He gave his life.

UNDER THE PORCH

Lucky peeled the wings
off a fly
and gave them to me,
as Father might trust me
with the tiny screws
when he fixed his glasses.
But in my cupped hands
they disappeared.
It was a miracle.
We looked everywhere.
The fly buzzed —
how could it still buzz? —
much louder than before.
At last we reconciled ourselves
and knelt with great compassion
and watched as it moved
in an almost line,

then an almost circle,
there in the crawlspace
under the huge brushes
rigid with shellac:
and we were rapt
as if we'd found
the way out of loneliness.

John Allman

LIFTING HIM

The first time he fell, he was returning
food untouched and slid noiselessly down the
air, his breath like steam rising from tumbled
squash and steak, what a sin to waste. He lay there
staring at the blar wall and I lifted him.

The second time he rolled quietly out
of sleep and shivered all night on the stained
blue rug, the room listening politely, the
clapper of his tongue beating against his lips.
The birds raised a chorus and I lifted him,

bundled in blankets, to hospital, loam
crumbling from beneath his uncut gardener's
nails. Don't forget, he said, save the seeds of
Big Boys. Don't pull the leeks. I nodded and pressed
the button that craned the bed that lifted him.

The last time he fell, it was the air that
was falling. A pea rolled across the plate.
The sun grew hot. Cut roses kept molting.
How the light thrashed as I lifted him in my
arms and felt the slow tumble of his breathing.

Kerri Webster

MIRAGE

Never? everyone said and I said no,
never — not spiralling down a canyon's
void, not naked at the physics final, not
hovering above a street of elms. What it was
is that I slept beside him six years
and heard his: how the textbooks rioted
in their aisles, how everyone went to Vegas
but Vegas was gone. Once he turned to me,
asleep said how many museums are there and I
said thousands, though I'd never
been to any. People suggested: licorice tea,
let's see what the cards say, amethyst
under the pillow. This is what I saw
those years: his forehead wet with sweat;
his chest quaking. This is what I heard:
how the apocalypse fell on a Tuesday, how
some fast river killed him. I cannot tell you
how big this bed is now, can only say
that two nights ago some man chased me
down the cul-de-sac where Beth Anderson
lived in grade school, that last night
all the snakes of my childhood returned
to the heating grates, to the doorsills.
In daylight a man sends sage.
I put it in a white bowl, reply: Regardless
of the moraine that is your thigh, the boa.
Under the rug, made the rug look like hills.
And the asp. And this in the oven with its tanager
yellow, its black like ink sprayed
from a fountain pen, what is it? I will
go to the public library and look it up.
I will lie here and wait.

TRUTHS OF THE SUNDAY UNCLES

*Is there a certain calculus here
of things as they are?*

Exactly. Of unfinished conversations.
Windows open on the first warm day.
Of the spindle daybed in the south room
and the roof going bad.
Of angers as old as childhood
listening in the next room.

Are any here self-embedded?

Yes. The mother
and the father, who feed the birds
and cannot wear wool.
The son also. And the daughter.
Who experience brief clarities
of the red maple,
of the chip in the kitchen sink.

These are the streets that understand them?

Of course. Their yard sales. Their grit.

*What houses are these
where consequence descends?*

The driveways and dinettes,
the lilacs of the father's people,
with qualities of regret about their mouths,
of indignation, of good resolve,
and of the mother's people,
with rules for gathering bouquets
and greetings of old schoolmates,

whose stories intertwine in the photos,

who have not consented to a gray day,
an uncertain marriage, the dog next door,

nor the spreading depths of afterthought.

*Those would be the predicaments
Of the various in-laws?*

That is true. Everywhere there are clues.
In their ages. Their medications.

Why do they so purse their lips?

Because they do. As they sit. Make amends.
As they put out the good dishes
and stray through each other's lives.
As they utter vulgarities. Water the flowers.
Sing to the radio. Endure ironies
that will not look them in the eye.

Then this is how dailiness takes its toll?

Certainly. While outside the sun is shining.

And here are the rooms where they sleep?

Yes. The cousins. First, second, third.
Loners at their dream work,
who neglect the ironing,
lost their hair quite young.

The curtains flickering.

The mirrors keeping watch.

DUBLIN, 1923

The night Yeats learned he had won the Nobel,
Saint Mary's gazing on the Custom House,
the rhododendrons, Back Lane,
the statues and the river,
all that was and had been,
he and Georgie searched the house for wine,
the ardors aloud at the White Horse,
the dark lore aching
in the alleys and futile rooms,
on Fitzwilliam looking to the hills,
and finding none they cooked some sausages.

WAITING AT DULLES

pictures home, red wine, waking tomorrow,
thinks all sociology
is sifting itself
on the concourse, remembers Arnold
leaving on the bus, sees a Chinese girl
pushing a passenger chair,
thinks rickshaw, dragon
gates, his heart beating once a second,
thinks Foochow millions, Peking man, his
lungs expanding fifteen
times a minute,
thinks roofs of pagodas, divining sticks,
a sheen of Gobi dust on the air, storks
roosting on magnolias,
his brain surging
at thirty thousand cycles an hour,
thinks a shrine to the warrior Gung Gong,
Lao Tse riding a buffalo
along a rocky path,
hears the call for his flight, pictures

home, red wine, waking tomorrow, his stomach
muscles contracting with
his pulse, sending
waves of peristalsis one throb in three

DREAMS OF THE NUCLEOTIDES

Trevor lives in the hills above the Institute
in a flat from which he can see the monastery.

Olga has her own place near the campus.

He does genetics, she statistics.

He cooks, she says,
and from some angles is quite beautiful.
Notice the impudence, he says,
loitering at the corners of her mouth.

Late at parties
he does his Greek dance, she her flamenco.
To celebrate our acquired characteristics, he says.

From the kitchen window,
rinsing his breakfast things,
he can see the monks
already at work in the fields,
the hems of their robes gathered and tied.

Up since two, praying and chanting.

My biorythms, she says, are discontented.
My antiself plots in my sleep.

Beware, she says, of this tumescent youth.

This aging lecher, he says.

A demon of acumen, she says, lurks in his laughter.

There are no curious pedantries, he says.

The fittest carry detrimental genes.
Fatalities are lodged
in the viscous grey folds of psyche.
Perilous fables crouch
In the ruthless coils of DNA.

Because it appears, she says,
the human experience is in crisis,
I have worn my Chippewa jingle dress.

Let me count the ways, he says,
a man can fear a woman.

Far out in the night
she hears a furtive weeping.

Their cells, he has read,
are hardly larger than the planks
on which their straw pallets lie.

But, he says, these truths need not terrify us.
They are thrills of the double helix.
The nucleotides in their dreaming
are not for us but not against us.

Nothing matters, she says.
God does not remember my name.
I am an anxiety case
living in the litter of the moment.

Everything matters, she says.

In single file, he imagines, behind the abbot
they go through the cloister, telling their beads.

I am prepared, she says, to confess,
I, Everygirl,
With downcast eyes and uplifted breasts.
My lust is the motive power of all being.

The beastly obsession, he says,
of your master molecule.
All coded. Coded.
With your angers, your dark perceptions,
your multitudinous charms.

My restless fingers. The gurgling in my head.

Coded. Coded.

Coming home at about the false dawn,
he believes he can hear the Latin of their choir,
see them kneeling in their stalls.

The mutations, vacillating, drift, he says.
How accidental we are.
How improbable the human,
a thing of levers and hinges
and hydraulic rigs.
A system of matter
disposed to virtue and vice,
faith and despair,
to keeping watch on itself
and the predicament of mind.

Oh, a party, she says. Let's have a party.

Science lasts, he says. Youth does not.

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WE NEED YOUR HELP

Poetry Northwest is in its thirty-seventh 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

