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Editor
David Wagoner

Cover from a photo of a
Ringling Brothers – Barnum & Bailey
high wire act

Photo by Robin Seyfried

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POETRY NORTHWEST

WINTER 1998-1999

John Glowney

Four Poems

MELVILLE IN PARADISE

The soul, neither animal, vegetable, mineral, is shunned in the material world.

Diaphanous orphan,
or the child left out of the game of kick-the-can,
crying under the porch.

A grand pronouncement spread like a cloud over the animal realm,
so useless, yet so undeniable.

And Melville, jumping ship
in paradise, transmuted,
the women, naked,
openly sexual,

or Beethoven hesitating over this note, the next
—base anguish given
angelic voice of disturbed air—
he marks it, erases it,
pens it in again... .

What cannot be undone inside us becomes a choice.

The human approximation
of otherworldliness

blinks open,
 the physical aggregates around us,
ill-dressed in the scourge of whorish flesh.

Like sailors shanghaied by doctored drinks
 we are forcibly carried aboard, we awaken
 to years at sea, sick, misused,

we take up the whaler's ways,
 we ride the hard ocean, tattoo ourselves
 with secret symbols.

Until mid-life. Until now. We return,
the village uninhabited, the fields overgrown,
our wives with other men.

To whom can we explain these fresh appetites,
 what extremities
 we have seen with our own eyes,

now that we have again stepped out
of the overturning surf
 onto the beach and its hot white sand

an evolving music fluting
in the air within ourselves
 that our mouths cannot yet sing.

TRISTAN & ISOLDE: THE 1981 SEATTLE
OPERA POSTER

He is the color of the sea,
greenish-blue, the sea
where it is lost in itself, where it shades
into chalky cumulus clouds, far out,
nearly at the horizon.

She wears a blue gown,
a red sash,
yet it is the light, white,
on the swell of her breasts
that our eye is drawn to.

We think he is dead but he is not.
We think she can save him but she cannot.

What she can do is lie close and bring warmth,

what we might consider
a useless gift to
the near dead,

yet it is what we, as lovers, tumbling into bed together,
give so casually
and miss so deeply when alone

we would die for one last embrace

our lover's mouth opening to ours
the last breath we take
not our own.

GIVING BLOOD

Volunteers all: the white-haired nurses,
tan students, secretaries, wan businessmen
line up for blood-letting. No blood-factories,
but a cottage industry, piece-work laborers
paid in the coin of good citizenship. Have you
had sex for money or drugs in the last
six months, they ask, when the question
we should be asked is have we loved
for sex, did we embrace fully in
our hearts those whose bodies, in
carnal tide of night, opened
and flowed with our bodies, those who, much later,
having left our lives, leaving in us this unanchored
tattering hole that only rents and
unbinds further in the embrace of another,
pass without speaking, years later, in the grocery—
our blood still leaps, the passion-blush
rising in our faces.

The needle pricks, a cruel steel nail.
I am left to siphon off the leakage
of the heartpump's suck and throw.

Drink ye all of this...in remembrance of me...
but here among the disembodied rabble, the thieves,
the forgiven one and the unforgiven
one, indistinguishable, it is a scientific
transaction. No transubstantiation, no
priests to assist, only nurses ministering sterile ligature.

Only the rooms of the heartbroken lying on cots.
Only the thin purplish-red line of blood force-fed

vein to vein and we are transported into
another's arms, this systolic embrace
of strangers binding us blindly
to another, this unrehearsed union
between the pulse of bodies,

another heart healing across the common darkness
with mine,

red,
red as fire,
cadenced, blessedly anonymous.

HER ROSES

She bought them, young roses,
and planted them in the wide, stave-sided
half-barrels she dragged to the fence
and filled with bags of topsoil.

I have not weeded or watered for two summers now.

One afternoon when I was at the office
she wrestled them carefully into the barrels,
the spindly gangling sharp-neededled
yet easily breakable tall spines
of roses, dug a deep place for their roots
in the black soil and gentled them in, hauled
buckets of water, then straightened up
and stood back
from her work.

The front beds are now an embarrassment of neglect,
the few remaining chrysanthemums and larkspur
and zinnias strangled, overgrown, wasting.

The first year they shined, shook forth
heavy blooms, too many to count,
the abundant soft gatherings of pastel
light into fold upon fold of petals—
you could drift into the refuge of the evening
on these swans of twilight.

For two summers I have not watered or weeded.
The roses, however, have extended tendrils, curled

long wands along and above the fence, quietly
securing their place in the yard.

Today, late summer, I spy a last unraveling bud
amid the darkening congregation of many dying blooms,
yellow, the weight of silk,
the weight of absence,

and the dead and dying blooms filling the stalks,
a mass of petals drifting down, falling,
spilling over,
so many dead petals drifting over
the grasses below that they are
like a holy water you could kneel in
or scoop up with your two hands
and pour over yourself
in absolution, in absolution
of your many sins.

Martha Zweig

SPUTTER

Have it your own way, Paul! let's all
join in hospice for weeks,
telephone, come, go, not
doing deathwatch, Paul
doesn't do death,

stuffing ourselves, talk, fill, dump the ashtrays,
rummage after something-or-other for one of the kids,
stumbling into each other, into odd chores, fits & starts.
You preside from time to time, propped up.

No doubt you intrigue it all for yourself, who
shows up when, with whom, who never does, everybody's
everlasting intricate scandals & bickerings even exiled
firmly out to the backyard more
than once, *if that's what you're gonna do,*

commotions & machinations that smart women
keep up best, whose men
nudge into it awkwardly, at cross-purposes,
& soon withdraw, hulk at each other morosely,
& head on out for the next grocery & beer run.

Overhearing, must be,
but less & less the detail of it, Paul nods, wakes, sleeps,
feels the good vibrant web hum.

...

Beach picnic, years ago.

Put Paul in his boat,
the outboard he tinkered on all winter long
so that now it didn't run differently than it didn't
run last fall:

Paul's occasion to clown his dismay for us,
fresh mechanical ingenuities, fresh dismay;

funny man, fat man, give that
sucker another finger, self-slap upside-the-head, pantomime
magic trickery, do tantrum, abject prayer, thrust in
the lewd strokes, kiss the thing like dice & yank as bright
water lapped
him gently away.

O backfired, detonations! wasn't he positive
he could tease any old ghastly motor,
get it to choke on itself & turn
itself over just one more time.

Where's the paddle now? Paul lost it out
in the middle of that enormous lake, didn't
he fuss & fume!
It got late.
He can't get home.

Gary Fincke

THE PROBABLE PERMANENCE OF TOYS

The government is looking for landfills,
Doing the full-time job of deciding
What's under our feet. In the newspaper,
Our county's map is shaded with live sites
Beside a feature on Silly Putty
And its golden anniversary year.
"It's indestructible," an expert says,
Citing four thousand tons of it, telling
Stories of its magical bounce, the way
It lifted images from comic books,
How, because it mimics the specific
Gravity of our flesh, we empathize
With the probable permanence of toys.
Eight million pounds are in landfills and lakes
And the basements of abandoned houses.
Outside, my daughter's dog digs in the yard,
Attacking the one spot where something must
Be hidden, the hole remaining empty
As the fifty I dug in Canada,
In Lake Nippissing's beach were I buried
And never found the Roy Rogers' cap gun
I'd carried from Pittsburgh where Johnny Mize
Posed on the oldest baseball card I owned.
All summer, I thought the nine seasons since
He'd played was my secret way back to birth,
That his last bloop single hung in the air
While my lungs started their basic counting.
Until it's buried, everything tells us
We're important. I crank up the window
To shout, "Find it," but that dog exposes
The planet, the hole in the lawn staying
Empty so long I think it will widen
Until it tumbles my house to fill it.

Gail Martin

THE ANT AND THE THERAPIST

We know you hate us. We startle
you with our quick black
bodies, our resolute ways.
You open the dishwasher
on a cool morning, we waiting,
warm inside the damp cave.
You settle on the lawn
chair to watch the sun
move, we crawl up
through the webbing
beneath you. Infiltrate
your screens.

How you strike at us!
Slamming down a shoe,
crushing us
with a wad of Kleenex

"Your reactivity is
interesting," says the therapist.

We are industrious,
faithful to a great plan.
We are not diverted by the smell
of a bad potato, the drip
of water from a faucet.
A slice of ripe pear
in our path won't draw
us off course.

The therapist says,
"Make room for your sadness.
Sit with it," and you do.
But we show up again:
leaf-cutting ants,
seed-gathering ants

managing loads bigger than
our thoraxes, bigger than our shadows.

The therapist says,
"Bring pictures of the child
you grieve for,"
and you do.
But here we are:
harvester ants,
acrobat ants,
kidnapper ants who hide
in the walls of another's
nest and steal her babies.
We walk fast, run
really, three feet always
hitting the ground.
Our speed, our focus
make you frantic.

We travel places you cannot:
the church of white ribs
a doe has left beside an aspen,
the back of a broken sidewalk,
the scarlet globe of a peony
before the fragrant show.
We see beneath things.

The therapist says, "The trick
is to tell the truth" and you try,
but yellow thief ants
show up on the wallpaper
in the downstairs bathroom
and fierce nomad ants
continue to flank and divide,
though wholly blind, tapping
and smelling their way. The trick
is to show up as yourself.
You try to do that.

The therapist says,

"Swim through your feeling;
Let it carry you like a wave.
If you resist, it will roll you,
suck you away in its undertow."
You think of us then:
Steamship ants
stowing away to other lands,
Slave owner ants, so effete we can't even feed
ourselves, a queen, tired of being
an angel, ripping off her wings
and tunneling toward darkness.

Steven Reese

SNAP THE WHIP

Centrifugal, those first places: circles
widening away from the house, the yard—
the limits you were supposed to have feared
left behind in the dust wake of bike wheels.

Your father swings you flat out around him,
then slows till you touch down in a leaf pile.
At school it's planets, orbits, tether ball,
Apollo's round-the-moon slingshot for home.

Your big brother spins the ride in the park
so fast the world blurs, unless you can reach
the slow center; the perimeters teach
more dizzy physics than you can stomach.

And it's there at the heart of *snap the whip*,
too, this same first law of centers, circles,
flyaway force, one of whose articles
states that you shall be made to lose your grip

on the hands of those running beside you—
those who, in their turn, hold another's hand,

a charging nine-member line—when one end
pulls up, digs in, becomes the centrifuge

from which a surge, like laughter, emanates,
ripples down through the line of hands, and *snap*,
it arrives at the end, at the whip's tip.
The last two are the first it separates,

and they go headlong for the summer grass;
then the next two, as the line circles round
this new hub; then everyone's on the ground,
content to be gravity's thralls at last.

And you don't notice the white train of cloud
about to be drawn across the sun's face,
or the cap, ten yards off, like the last trace
of someone who's simply stepped below ground,

or even the black slab of open door
in the distance, over near the grownups—
none of the small signs telling you you'll glimpse
this moment again, years and miles from here,

when what you've tried to hold has slipped your grip
and you're stretched out in park grass, not quite sure
how the force arrived: but less like *laughter*
this time. More than ever like *lash*, like *snap*.

AFTERWARDS, YOU LEARN

Afterwards, you learn to say
you were lucky, the last-year's cubs
stayed safely behind her, breaking
the thickets for berries. Lucky
the wind from the darkening valley
turned cold, and your jacket was heavy,
and zipped to the neck. Lucky
you knew, too late for retreat
in that clearing of downfall and stone,
to drop and go fetal, arm
over neck, playing dead. Lucky
the backpack came off like an arm,
saving most of your arm, and kept her
busy till the grunting cubs
called her back to their feast.

Afterwards you learn to say
that the fault was yours: you were tired,
you were stubborn, making up for lost time
on that summer-growth trail through clearings
and thickets, the wind in your face,
not bothering to sing out or warn
what was there besides you, not waiting
for warnings to reach you.

But sometimes, in sleep, you go back
to that stonefall clearing, that edge
of safety where your scalp hair rises
like hackles for no reason you see,
and there is still enough time to go back
as that dark shape lifts upright
from its tangle of shadow, like a man
in a burly fur suit, peering out,
and you wake with the ghost hairs rising
like fur on your unscarred neck
and perfect right arm.

AN OLD STORY

Now, in our time, he is safe
in a chamber built in his honor.
The most skillful attendants, precautions,
care no Pharaoh could buy.
Now he is valued by nations,
recorded in history. Now
we have nations and history.

At the end, caught by snow on the high
mountain ridge, he fell or lay down
in a bowl in the rock, his head
pillowed on rock, his ear
folded under. He lay sideways, protecting
the ribs that were broken weeks before.
At the last his fingers let go
of the ember carrier, a birch-bark tube
that rolled from his grasp. A gentle
death, our experts say, no signs
of distress. For five thousand years
the snows kept him safe.

Now we inherit his goods: tools,
pannier, fire pouch, the healing fungus.
Scraps of the thatched grass cloak.
Fur clothing, skillfully sewn.
Axe of copper and yew, dagger
of flint and ash. His two arrows
broken, the fur quiver damaged,
days or weeks before the high ridge.
His old bow gone, the bow string saved.
Gnawed splinters of bone, from dried ibex meat.
A sloe, that ripens in autumn. Husks
of einkorn and wheat in the ember carrier,
remnants of threshing.

An able man in his thirties,
our experts say: most likely a herdsman
come home with his flock from high summer pastures

for harvest and shearing; then forced to flee
and keep going, wounded, ill-armed,
at a dangerous season.

We inherit his story, and shape it
with ours. We do not want
to think him a fool, or crazed.
Give us Cain, give us Abel,
an impossible task, a struggle,
a judgment. Or a village slaughtered,
and he alone escaped.

We know he could not go back.

We know he had hope. He had almost finished
a new bow of yew, the best wood.
He had started new arrows, from shoots
of the wayfaring tree. He had almost reached
the pass that herdsmen have used
some five thousand years.

Because he did not survive, he survives.

POST-CONCUSSION, BREAKING DOWN

Stone in my hand, small
curved and fossil-broken
river stone, white,
eroded, chill. Outside
the sleeping B & B
I lift you from the cairn
made by our banded hosts
whose faiths I partway share.
A spider scouts the cairn,
retreats, its cliff-face gone.
A door, far off. Then stillness,
greyness flow around us.
The safe still hours before
day's ordinary lights
and sounds break through. The hours

when I can see.

Your small weight
comforts me, your smooth
hand-shielded shape. The child's
skull turning in my womb
some thirty years ago,
before she came to light.
The broken mammal skull
I found in the wetland paths
at home, the fur and jaw
dragged farther back. Bright paths,
small seeping tracks. Now I trace
your stone-webbed fossil caves,
where something older lived
and broke away.

Shapes
of lobes, the overhanging
frontal cliffs that kept
Anasazi safe. Eyeholes
carved from waves of stone,
smooth walls built up from small
free-fallen stones. Chill
shadows, where the dancers filled
the kiva's skull, where we
who never knew those prayers
climbed slowly in. The safe
high socket of a world
that fell away.

What lives
in your small caves? A fleck
that moves, a thin grey thread
of spider's work. Grey clouds
unravel, shot with light.
A door, slow steps within
the waking B & B.
Eyes closed, I thumb your smooth
bone lobes, your fissured parts.
Small hardness holding up,
small breaking down.

Light spurts
through poplar leaves, a first

awakening strobe. A truck,
and soon more sounds, more harmless
lights that jab like lightning
threads across the eyes,
the brain. Enough. I kneel
to set you in your cairn. Stone,
stone, you can keep your wordless
breaking down. I have my own.

Philip Dacey

THOMAS EAKINS: THE BADLANDS

"After his firing for indecency, Eakins recuperated
in the Badlands at a cattle ranch."

John Wilmerding, *Thomas Eakins*

How far away from Philadelphia
I felt when the cowbirds came to settle
on cattle and horses, to eat their flies,
and even on me, though I had no flies
that they knew about, although the ladies
of Philadelphia would disagree.

I was out helping with the herd one day
and watching from my saddle the black birds
live in harmony with creatures bigger than they
when one bird came to my horse's head just
as I had thrown my leg all casual
across the pommel and rested, leaning, still.

Down that trusting thing ran in search of flies,
its pretty shape against the mass of neck
a pleasure to see, but finding none hopped
like no lady in Philadelphia
onto my knee, as if my knee and I were
excrescence of horse, part of the food supply.

You should have seen it on my slippery
leather breeches try to find some purchase,

a comic beginning skater on ice,
and finding none of that either open
its wings and flutter them to keep itself
a quarter of an hour on my leg,

touching my hand at times, the way no lady
in Philadelphia would dare touch it,
as if it were but part of wide Dakota,
handshape a form of landscape, and neither a threat,
rather as natural as the bird itself,
black bird and white hand, or brown by then.

The bird seemed to me a muscle with wings,
quick and compact and appetitive,
and I thought of the muscle in Philadelphia
the ladies did not want their daughters to see,
no bigger than a bird, its moves stitching
the seamless landscape of anatomy.

To wish the ladies of Philadelphia
a fate as cowbirds is not to wish them ill.
I would love them black and winged and slow to fear,
flying all day from me to cow to horse
and back, and they would love my knee: that bird
decamped only when I went to chase a steer.

PRENUPTIAL

My daughter calls to urge me
to plant passion flowers: You won't
believe, she says, the intricate shadings.
The lines. They stand for the wounds of Jesus.

This is not a religious child. She loves
the flower, says, Mom, when I marry him,
we will have a house and a yard
and I will plant passion flowers,
sweet peas, morning glories.
I think: Whatever works for you.
Do it. I do not say what I know:
You will be shocked by this man.
You will shock him.

Thirty days to sprout. I tend to them
but nothing comes up. *Are you sure*
you watered them every day? she says
doubting my vigilance.
Look, I say, I know what I'm doing.
I'm up to my neck in armloads
of whiskered poppies: red,
red-orange, yellow, white, hot-
pink and pink pink. What more
do you want from me? She says,
Try the passion seeds one more time.
Be sure you give them enough water.
The flowers are amazing
and there will be fruit, Mom.
Edible fruit.

OBSERVATION

I saw a life enter a life, yesterday, by the water,
when the peregrine swooped and snagged a plump dowitcher

and rose with the caught bird still alive and struggling.
And the falcon, pumping higher, lifted the writhing feast

with both talons to its bill and snapped the flailing neck,
not putting it out of its misery, just putting it out,

making it quiet, making the ride to the top branch smooth.
All of this took place in air. At last, settled

with its kill, the hunter pulled strand after strand
of flesh from the soft feathery body, and ropes of skin,

sinews and bones, until there was no shape left to it, only
a scrap of spine. I kept my focus while he did his work, the wind

coming up, the sun sliding down, the black arms
of the trees waving, the light on the water bending

and breaking, and I understood that where there were two birds,
there were still two birds: One who carries. One carried away.

Kary Barrett Wayson

LOVE THE WORLD

If you loved the world you'd quit smoking,
go to the dentist, notice your own feet
out on your walks. If you loved the world
you'd listen for the snaps the stars
might make if you listened
loud enough, if you listened long enough,
you'd flush and love it, brush each tooth
with attention, lift dinner plates,
dip water pitchers, give napkins
like gifts. These days you're like an actress
paid to play a waitress who loves the world
you *could* love if you painted occasionally,
planted tomatoes, called your mother. Look at Mary:
she hikes. You never hike. Even with mountains
in ranges only an hour away. You'd light candles.
You might pray. You wouldn't look for proof.
You wouldn't mind what wasn't there.
Your father, you'd thank him.
You'd cook your own dinners
and you wouldn't want more than apples,
an orchard, a ladder, a basket with handles, and *that*
particular pear.

Lance Larsen

SPIDER LUCK

One toe-nudge too many and she exploded, poor
mother spider, into a slick of babies — no more
than spilled commas, unless you knelt
at the open door with a used paperback of *Beowulf*,

as I did, to rescue them, and happened
to notice the pool playing *hide the button*
with Cassiopeia and wondered about heroic codes
in general and my cowardice in specific

for not swimming naked at 2:30 am and which lunatic
neighbor slipped into my apartment to steal
half a rotisserie chicken while I mailed a letter
and which one I should trust to water my ferns

and why rain is almost never a possessive
and whether I was the only one awake enough
to hear the wind saying with its hundred
mouths, *Never mind, whose little orphan are you?*

Jim Peterson

MY MOTHER'S BACK

I had failed for months to see my mother.
I was far away, I reasoned. Now she was
maimed by this pain, by this knot of cancer
curled around her spine.

To see the crow on the low limb
not ten feet from my face,
I was surprised I did not have to dance barefoot
all day on burning stones.

A steer stood nearby in the hot ravine.
It leaned among rock shadows,
stirred the dust with a split hoof
and stared at me with amazed eyes.

This was no time of meditation,
of sinking into reverie. Not even
the clarity of wanting nothing. Not even
the peace of wanting something so simple

as finding the familiar track of a mule deer
in sand. The crow's feet scraped bark.
He cocked his head and glared at everything
but me. Such blackness was an edgy

absence among the leaves. The wind
curved over him like water over stones.
The rock face behind him caught the sun
and swelled into copper and gold.

But still he did not fly. Nor did I,
sitting plank-backed among the rocks,
trying not to think at all, not to find her face
in the shadows shuffling over the canyon wall.

Lynne Knight

Three Poems

THEIR BODIES LAY SO FAR

Each night the self lay down to escape
gravity. Even those in the highest beds
felt themselves curve
to the world's surface and begin
the slow spin like an infant,
fist bunching the blanket,
eyes shut.

Then the veer into space.
Some took horses. Some ran.
Some flew as if the sharp bones
had been wings all along.
All around them the dark, the cold fires.
How it tired them, the keeping going,
while their bodies lay so far away.

When it was almost day, rush
of shoe and spoon, the self
that had gone all that time
into nothing
slipped back into the brain
like a shadow of the moon's other side.
Or the death shadow,

close as the skin.
Over time the self would try
to rid itself of this but wake many-skinned
like a snake unable to molt.
And the self would know the heaviness
of lightest moments,
keeping going with its dead.

SLEEP

Sleep was going south. It passed Baja,
kept going all the way to Patagonia
and there I was, stranded on the bed
like a woman abandoned halfway
through. Why wasn't I dreaming

the *slishshsh* of the waves as sex
by now? No doubt the actual heat
of the night had burned my desire
to ash, and besides, my lover
had given up on the bed altogether,

was downstairs reading, spooning
Ben & Jerry's from the carton.
You must be doing something wrong,
my mother would say when told of
my sleeplessness, and maybe I was,

maybe I lay every night letting guilt
take me like a selfish lover, ignoring
everything but his own pleasure,
then pulling on his pants and socks
while I moaned for more, as far

from sleep as I was then, when
sleep began to round Cape Horn,
head for open sea and Madagascar.
If I ever caught up with it, I'd want it
for days. And I was pulling close,

I could feel the sea spray on my face
when lips chilled by Cappuccino Delight
started down my breast, my thigh—
But I might have been dreaming.
It was sweet enough for sleep.

ARCHER

I never meant to hurt you
the lover swears at the end.
You know the scene: someone
standing, hand toward the door
while the world goes on as if nothing
has changed. For a time, the one
left behind makes no move.
As if an arrow had entered the heart.

Then rage, mess, insult of memory:
I never meant...
Until one night the words fly out of the moon,
out of sleeves in the closet.
All of them sharp tipped.
All of them hissing.
All of them entering the heart repeatedly.
And there is no death.

And this is what was meant.

HORSE STANDING IN SUNLIGHT

Witless to think such grazing could wound the sun and
yet the sun seems
wounded—late slippage

in a relief of clouds—fence line plunging
the roll
of fields, top wires

edged precisely with sunlight. She makes a knot
of her
face and what lasts is the orbital

twist of lilac, rain's drizzle
on tin
roof, her scent frail as a watermark. Men

sometimes fail miserably at love—in the bronzed
dark, watery
shadow, legs braid, un-

braid; curtains drift; a column
of thought
folds back on itself like a piece of string

so that no movement forward can undo
its sorrow-
ful gaze—see how the horse stands, claustral,

not one hoof touching the ground—
porous
fluid—

the shadow it hovers in.

Utterly transfixed. The very sign of amplitude,
unbidden
grace, its bronze coat

shimmering. The sun's eye,
liquid,
reflected in the horse's eye like ore

or nervous water. *Sudden impulse:*
desires
to flee—a blue jay's shadow prints its flanks

with a sharp rip, black glide, then shreds itself
to rain
in grasstop. Downrange, downwind,

out of the field of vision, a spring foal on its side—
all lung and
breath—in a nest of grass. They've gone

back to watch the ballgame finish,
the Amish
women cobalt, orchid, teal, mustard yellow,

pitch and catch. Hard hits to where
the horses stood,
cattle on folded limbs

in a trampled corner. On a rise across the road
one
horse standing in sunlight.

Fence at its back.

Wind stippling an acre of tree-line to whale
skin, a shudder
the oaks

pick up and carve to the river; the overhanging willows,
downed,
electric. She makes a knot

of her thought and strides tidally
into the unwashed
dark, the freshly

mottled bleed-through. Dress, richly colored,
finely
textured. To touch the silence.

Wreckage of grass. *That the horse might continue grazing.*
Backwash
of teal, orchid, cobalt, burnt

yellows, rain's fine drizzle at daybreak, orbital
twist, a man's face
gone pale as a watermark.

Sudden impulse: but does not flee.
Arms slowly
raised to fence-wire: *to un-wound the sun.*

*That the horse might still and the quiet
linger and
the colt awaken and take the apple from her hand.*

THE WAVE (DISSECTED)
for S.

is no less remarkable
for its unfocused passion than my fingertips right now
working a lavender-
scented lotion onto a woman's back. From
the base of the spine
then up and over knotted vertebra (touching her ribcage
with my palms)—my hands,
frangible chalk, sweep in leaf-like, fan-like patterns. The
deep movement
the same but different—the pressure
different—her
response different—my fingertips blown apart to the nothingness
of spray.

There is no color

for this in the dark though I say vermilion with an under-
coat
of green. Though something

pastel-
tinged must linger in the drying lavender streaks—I can feel
the moisture

wick into the very skin, receptive lateral canvas-
she's tipped
on her side—some of the moisture

gone already
to deep water presence. Now she turns and her throat tightens
blue

at the collar

bone. Now stirs, and is breath externalized. Curtains
swing a little
in the breeze. Each window

propped
with a slightly curving stick to let more air in, time
reduced

to milk cloud and hidden star points. Now a cat
breaks over
the edge of bed and crushes

blankets,
licks at a paw, curls in that zone between the energy
of sleeping

waves—

which cannot touch except through fingertip, that casual
(because
waves are mindless) reaching over

so nipples harden and
belly shines. Moonlight
lengthens in the still room, adumbrates what must be

some last wren-shaped fluttering—bird or wind—
in down-leaning
maple: single white arm, tapered ribline, upper

thigh—
one hand idly churning. Now hair swept up with angular
palm-

stroke—

neck chords flaring—as if water itself were
one part
wind and this its leaping out in muscular form, molten

arc,
briefly held instant. I keep my hand at her throat, tran-
sition,

follow curve, pearled glide of collar bone, more
transition, wave
swell, breathing and then not breathing, and then more

change, tran-
sition... Windowpane, flash of traffic, the black air hooding
it all

with measureless silk.

Robert Tremmel

Three Poems

KOAN FOR A DYING BIRD DOG

A Monk asked Joshu, "Has a
dog Buddha Nature or not?"
Joshu answered, "Mu."
—Mu-mon
The Gateless Gate

Near the end of winter
I place a carved figure
of a pointer that looks
a lot like her
on the altar
in the place Buddha would sit:
incense on one side,
dried flowers opposite.

She is no bother.
She lies there,
waits quietly,
and from time to time
raises her head, turns
back over her shoulder
as if to see who it is
in the doorway this time.

She reminds me,
"There is no need to hurry,
to arrive
where you must finally leave.
Carry each breath lightly,
each one,
as if each one
were just each one."

She teaches me.
Smoke drifts past her eyes,
shallow pools of candlelight,
moonlight, snowmelt in the garden,

frozen over each night,
fourteen years of her life,
my life. Cataracts of ash,
season upon season,
piles of dead at her feet,
and the final pink bloom
of her own sphincter
only months away,
I would guess.

Mu this, Old Joshu

THE DEAD ELK ON THE TUNDRA BESIDE THE TOURIST PATH

—June 21,
Fall River Pass, Colorado

It is the summer of snow.

Women wearing sandals,
men, loafers on their feet,
slide across it, annoyed
and grumbling that the Park Service
could be so inconsiderate,
the air so thin.

Two tiny canvas shoes
with yellow ducks
and yellow laces
stamp through puddles of melt;
a pink backpack filled
with Gummi Bears
floats in the clouds.

It is the spring of no flowers.

Hollow belly
opens on the east,

jawbone points north.

If we could follow
the eyes far enough
we would find them
watching us,
hiding behind us
in the feathered sunlight,
hanging in the wind, waiting
for petals to appear
on our tongues, and bloom
in the palms of our hands.

CROCKER TOWNSHIP PHYSIOLOGY

*Our bodies are like dew on the grass,
our lives like a flash of lightning,
vanished in an instant.*

—Eihei Dogen
Fukanzazen-gi

Early morning. Candlelight.
Sitting
with back straight, left foot
on right thigh,
right foot tucked under; left hand
open on right,
thumb tips together,
and that is the skin's own
smell which rises
from a long way off
and gathers in
the spaces between.

Birth smell, undertone
of chemical, chrome,
deep cut of disinfectant,
paralyzing rush
of sense which comes
when the inside of a living
body is suddenly sliced loose

and emptied
into a closed room.

Life smell,
poured out by the spoon,
the cup, the pint, pooling
where it flows, draining
past stems
of switchgrass, compass plant,
clusters of bloodroot,
tendrils of stone
died red, accelerated
to sweet smelling dust.

Outside, a light breeze
rattles corn leaves,
then settles.
Dew gathers,
distilling itself
in clear drops, turmoils
of rot sit down all together,
rise to silent petals.
Odorous galaxies
burning deep within bone.

Len Roberts

Two Poems

THE GOLDFINCH, MY FATHER, IN THE FORSYTHIA

He is going on forever
in the newly brilliant
forsythia,
gold blur in yellow,
ready to take on the
grackles
and robins if he must,
tough little bastard
that he is,
and he will not shut up.
Of course he's you again,
left hand six inches
from your left cheek,
right hand ready to snap
the wrist,
send me reeling in that
backyard grass
while old man Tremblay watches
from his window and shouts

Out!
I finally learned to box
before you died
of that rotten heart,
clipping your ear anytime
I wanted, —
even those few sober days
you thought
you could make a comeback,
get a woman, some money,
a job—
always falling for the second
feint
that got you open, wide-mouthed,
like that morning you were
lifted
into the ambulance and wailed

away,
knocked out on the spot
by the very right cross
you'd always warned me about,
the one that shot straight
from the heart.

THE FIVE STEPS IN PROVING THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

The Norway maple waves wildly
in the strong wind,
as though trying to get my
attention,
my eyes watching but my mind
full of ambition,
to fill this silence, to name
what cannot be named,
to work without effort
as I did yesterday
when I shoveled fifteen cubic
yards of mulch
onto my wife's flowerbeds
and still had time to look
around
at late April's sunset,
the gold lighting hemlock
and spruce needletips
like candles in the bluing dusk,
some flickering, some not,
when Sister Ann Zita's words
flashed
into my head, *These are the
five steps
to prove the existence of God,*
her hand writing them on the
chalkboard
as the cloud that had covered
the sun passed,

slowing filling that classroom
with gold
while she formed the number five
with three easy strokes,
the last thing I saw before
the light erased it all.

Brent Pallas

THE FLYCATCHER

"...I have heard my father tell how he overheard the boatswain...
pointing out the officers: "That's our first lieutenant; that's our
doctor; that's our flycatcher."

— Francis Darwin, *The Life of Charles Darwin*

Collector of the cool pebble,
the pigeon's egg, the cretaceous curl
of bone,

the significant deep beneath
the overgrown hollow, the tendril
unraveling

over stone, the eroded waste,
the bark, the overhanging entablature
of leaves

on a distant riverbank. Days
without end, flightless, his bones rattling,
unable

to eat, only raisins.
Lifting a cup, turning a page, scribbling
a note. The black

ink turning gray as the sea
lifts everything, scouring decks, twenty-
three days

off the Cape. The feathered
comb, the cranial, the carapace, the cock's
cry

at dawn. A dove cooing
softly from its morning nest of shadows.
Each

season shedding its wings. Five
years out. A splinter of rain splitting
the seed,

a bug too small to hold
the point of a pin. But the little toad is quite
baffling

in its vermilion and black,
beautiful and blinking in the sunlight
as a rabbit

leading her young out
into a calm sea of grass. Everything
a lovely bloom

unfolding
like a spider hanging by the thread
of its own

existence. A curious
note scrawled in a margin too small
to contain it.

And when he found
the beautiful white bones he picked them up
and took them home.

And then
it was evening with no one to talk to
about beetles.

Harry Humes

Two Poems

AUGUST EVENING WITH TRUMPET

Up in the woods a neighbor or stranger
who has had enough of August,
its spider webs and first yellow

near the roots of corn,
has out of the blue found his old voice,
wailing away everything

he can remember.
Maybe he will play
right through fall and winter,

not stopping until bloodroot
and anemone blossom.
But now it is almost dark,

a little mist over the fields,
last sounds playing out
as simply as longing or breath.

THE ANTLER TREE

One night I will sneak across the alfalfa
and up along the stream to my neighbor's house,
to the antlers, their whiteness
catching moonlight,
and run my fingers
along skull plates and tines,
loosen the nails,
and take them to the overgrown orchard,
leaving them beneath apple trees
for mice, the brown thrasher
to rest on, for whatever else
might come along and softly cover.

BIRDER

I might have said thanks, no,
I must remain at the lodge,
am ailing, expecting a call, signed up for tennis.
But, as Montaigne said of the scheme of things,
now it is done.

Since dawn we have crept, alien creatures,
through fields and groves that whirr,
that click, that om to us
of what, given genetic drift,
we could have become.

Aha. This is to be a cautionary entertainment,
a fantasia of cheeping lives,
of learning again how to obey Earth.

Men should not be allowed to fly,
Doctor Johnson announced,
until they have become virtuous.

There, oh, there is a rufous-sided towhee,
scratching in the dead leaves beside the stump,
says the lady with the three-fingered handshake
who loaned me binocs.

A woodcock is a bogsucker
is a timberdoodle is a Scolopax minor,
declares the ministerial gentleman
with a life list of over three hundred sightings.

It was surely a nymph just now,
flitting through the trees,
or the ghost of an ancient pagan.

Somewhere along this old snake fence
must grow the hyssop that corrects lethargy,
the cowslip that restores beauty.

Something hangs obliquely on the air,
random, ineluctable, grave,
as if the Whatever, like Andre Gide,
wrote to be reread.

Here in the field guide are the wood thrush,
ruby-crowned kinglet, scarlet tanager,
in territorial display, in courtship ritual,
pileated woodpecker, black-capped chickadee,
black-throated green warbler, and the sparrow,
cousin, perhaps, of the one in the Zen temple
that twitters of the Great Matter.

See the ring around the eye
at nine o'clock in the paper birch?
The stripe along the wing in the sycamore,
familiar to the girl Helen in Sparta,
to Gautama on the last day
of his seven years in the forest?

Peet-shay, cries the Acadian flycatcher.
But we, what are we to do?

Tsickajwee-jwee, cries the tufted titmouse.

But we, what are we to do?

WITH TRICK KNEES AND A FEAR OF DOGS

Think of this colonel in the reserves
reading the book page
in a lounge at Newark International.
He is waiting in his cowboy boots
to join a conducted tour.
Beside him is a cadet,
his son,
morose, watching the girls.

Think of these sundry folk

also assembling for Bavaria,
Oberammergau,
the Passion Play,
this forester,
this prioress of a progressive order
and these shrewd evangelical males
with trick knees and a fear of dogs,
this merchant
and this clerk-like brainy person
with cousins in Alabama and Vermont.
Think how slyly they inspect each other,
hem line, hair line,
eyes, hands,
mouth, shoulders —
how they scan themselves for story.

Think of their hostess,
guide, informant,
Elena,
candidate for a doctorate in the humanities,
twenty-nine and personable.
Think of the third ear of Elena,
her sensibility for the density of things,
for lucid empathies,
for the spreading depths.

Think how the lawyer is suspended among the clouds,
out of time,
disobliged,
dozing in a reverie of his father's laugh,
how the man of property and the haberdasher
skim the feature and the expose,
how the paperback plots among the rows,
how anecdote, aisle and window, jollies the truth
of a coup, a squall off the Chesapeake,
mistakes that lust can make.

Think how Elena abhors whatever is philistine,
is unevolved,
is vulgar or fatuous

or cheerfully diminishes the world,
how Elena rues a sociology
that solicits its own delusions.

The hotel has an English-speaking hairdresser.
There is no casino,
but the beer gardens are lively.
Think of the carpenter in these fairy tale streets,
figments of the old country,
the penitent cook and seaman
in their seats for sixteen acts
of pageant against an Alpine drop,
Last Supper to Resurrection,
the physician and the merry divorcee
shopping for dirndl and famous carving,
taking fat mountain trout at the Alte Post.

Think how Elena disregards this oriental legend,
these rumors of Infinite Cleverness.

Think of them going home,
the country preacher, the stable hand,
to Keokuk, Wild Horse,
rooms into which the ironies have settled,
the grain dealer, bursar, tenant farmer,
to the silence of the Pine Barrens,
haze on the Mississippi,
uncertain cholesterol.
Think of the patrolman returning to insomnia,
to moths around the streetlights,
the loan officer to a son's animosity.

Think of Elena bidding them goodbye.

About Our Contributors

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Poetry Northwest is in its thirty-ninth 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.

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David Wagoner
Editor

