



Poetry

NORTHWEST



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Editor  
David Wagoner

Cover from a photo of a  
storage facility on a farm  
north of Stanwood, Washington

*Photo by Robin Seyfried*

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# POETRY NORTHWEST

WINTER 1999-2000

## *John Bensko*

Three Poems

### ROTHKO

#### I.

I'd like to tell you a story, he said.  
He was sitting in his studio, you know how he was,  
past middle age and fat, his eyes behind  
those glasses more and more myopic.  
It's about a little girl, he said,  
and it has nothing to do with why you're here,  
nothing to do with art I mean. It's just a story.

Emotion without image, at worst  
the wonder of sitting in an empty room.

So he went on, and I was losing interest.  
Half the time, you know, he didn't make sense,  
like those dark paintings he did before  
he died. You stare at them for hours and where  
does it get you? This thing about the little girl,  
it was just about seeing her each day  
on his way home, how she was always skipping rope.

#### II.

One rectangle is blue, another red, another yellow.  
No, this sounds too simple. You can't do this  
and call it a lie.

So I said, tell me what it means, and I meant  
the painting he was working on, but he said



it means I hated her. He turned  
and didn't say another word. Painting,  
he stubbed the green in hard  
as if to press it through.

Suicide. Approaching, its slow form  
marks him, like the rhyming of a poem, a color.  
Shading saves the day, like love and forgiveness.

### III.

The dark purple at the top is both the lid  
of the grave and the spirit as it rises. Below,  
the red is the grave and the body  
of the man who lies in it. Sunk into the ground,  
into the burnt orange which is life,  
the earth takes from the sun this empty grave.  
Yes, my friend, in the field above it  
which we do not see, a girl is skipping rope.  
The grass is high and August turns it golden brown.  
We have to imagine this.

The artist knows it is not the same for everyone.  
Above the field he sees the mirror image  
of the grave, a lake. The day drifts into evening  
and he can hear the girl's father calling her to dinner.  
There is not enough time, enough space to get above this loneliness.

In the story, the girl is on a street corner.  
The critic goes home sick  
at the loss of his hero. Sentiment, he says,  
where does it get you? The girl skips.  
The world burns over. Burnt orange.

## RAGE FOR ORDER

Over six foot six and able to see  
*a country mile*, for my Grandfather Blanton  
the garden rows were never straight enough,  
fixed by transit to his hair's width

distinctions. To my grandmother, small, wandering  
her tight yet nimble fingers  
down the lines of beans, nothing mattered  
but space enough to put her knees.

He was a mason, the kind that sets up lines  
to lay the brick of houses.  
All across the county, he'd put up  
the walls of churches, sure to last

for centuries. She was his failure,  
too small and sure framed  
to need the brick at all,  
hampered by his weighty visions.

She told him the straighter rows  
shone like a beacon for birds.  
He answered that birds were not his concern.  
Let them fall where they may.

I loved them both, in summers lying  
between the rows of iris  
they'd transplanted from their city home,  
here to the country where stripped

from their terraces the flowers drooped  
and shifted their heads, bewildered  
as a crew of land-locked sailors  
on a wide prairie. Above me  
the bees and hummingbirds

wove a sound I thought of  
as the cloth of flowers.  
While beyond, the two bickering voices

sharpened themselves on each other  
like blades of scissors.  
I knew enough to stay out  
of their endless travels

back and forth from hatred to delight.  
Tall, white haired, like a god,  
he moved across the new plowed ground  
unballing his twine. Already springing up,

and sure to reach his height  
sooner than I could hope, I waited  
low down, head hidden between the flowers,  
knowing she was there somewhere

with me, her small fingers  
working the loose earth,  
tiny, sure-footed animal  
ready to battle him, hair by hair.

#### PLASTER OF PARIS

It was dark where she led me, both of us  
barely thirteen, to her mother's workshop.  
Rubber casts for plaster were heaped  
like an orgy of emptiness. Wet clay hung  
in plastic bags making heads more fearsome  
than the white deer which stalked the floor.

Love at first sight. Her eyes met mine  
in the Mid-America Mall. Now, uncertain first  
moments, surrounded by silent  
covens of the nude, powdered forest.  
Ellen. I would never see her again. But we hid

behind the oven still warm and touched  
as if we might feel a way to mold a life.  
The Irish pointer, his body half painted,  
showed the way. A nearby gnome was shy,

nodding to the open window.  
Ellen's hot breath and lips were a flock  
upon me. In the colorless glade, even a saint  
might be swept like a pile of crumbs.  
The heat grew. The dark hardened

its failed colors. Just when we would crack,  
the door, her mother, the cool night  
rushed in. Flurried as the geese I was flung  
by my collar into the waiting  
yard of birdbaths like a wide-eyed ghost.

Tossed beyond whiteness, do the dead  
recall only a bleached world, a few  
flushed faces? I looked back. *Again,*  
her mother screamed at her.  
I slunk off. A new life of shame.  
*Thank you,* I might have said to them. I scraped  
the powder from my knees and touched it  
to my tongue. *Kiss off, you old bitch,* I said.  
I doubt they heard me, or cared.

A VOYAGE TO ATLANTA CITY

—for Barbara Pucci

Atlantic City is not in the Atlantic Ocean.  
(If you throw a blue chip into the Atlantic Ocean  
it just sinks, whereas a blue chip in Atlantic City  
may struggle for a few minutes first.)  
It is a different place from Atlanta, where  
the Oglethorpes and the antelopes play,  
and has nothing to do with Atalanta,  
a virgin huntress of antiquity who will  
probably not reappear in this account.  
Neither Atlantic City nor Atlanta is the  
site of the ancient lost continent of  
Atlantis (although Atalanta, who seems to  
have swerved back into our lesson,  
may have stomped an anthill or two there.)  
Current thinking holds that Atlantis might actually  
have been modern Crete and sank into the sea  
because of the overcrowded souvlaki restaurants  
concentrated in the alleys of central Heraklion.  
Or: a suburb of prehistoric Antwerp (which, in fact,  
is the sneering insult Atalanta fired at Hippomenes.)  
Clement Attlee was mayor of Atlantic City, unfortunately  
at the same time as Charles Atlas, who kicked sand  
at him with dreary and predictable regularity until  
Attlee retreated to the Antilles disguised as a Catalan.  
(He became catatonic, but that broke his blackjack habit.)  
None of this has anything to do with Atlantic Avenue,  
our savory local shopping street, where the irrepressible  
Atalanta, hand in hand with Hippomenes (who  
fought the traffic through Cobble Hill to win  
the foot race and claim his prize), can frequently  
be seen hunting happily for olives in Sahadi's or eating  
burritos beneath the spreading ailanthus tree  
as the faithful heed the call and face Altoona.

LAST FAMOUS WORDS

nobody realized the language  
would end  
like a dying sun  
some words are already gone  
the light gets weaker  
every day  
silences grow longer  
friends meet on corners and  
their eyes go blank  
in mid-sentence  
so much is already  
inexpressible

BEANS

So, last three  
red beans  
in the can  
which didn't get  
into the pot —  
Now you get  
squashed  
down the drain  
and become part  
of Staten Island  
landfill  
instead of becoming  
part of me  
Don't fear  
It all comes  
to the same thing

THE NEIGHBORS — I

On the most part I would  
contribute this to Thanksgiving:  
cooking the turkey early which she  
is shrugging off her responsibility not  
to sleep and roast in the same period of time.  
So after that next a fire burn up  
her house like a Kleenex  
the trailer which  
she is living in so she, Pat, jumps  
out in the night and take off across the line  
to our abode. Knock, knock,  
But no, this answer to that event is,  
no way, she can't sleep overdue to she,  
Pat, personality-wise, would sell her father  
for a piece of fudge on account to where  
he must sleep it off in the park  
from faulty ways.  
Well, this fire is not subdued of wild flames yet  
which is now leaping over to our abode  
which has brought Frankie Nolls  
who is shouting he has simply had it of  
the lost of us forever so therefore we  
and Pat have Thanksgiving  
together and you can guess where.

THE NEIGHBORS — II

Now, I do not hold that he  
is lower than I am—why I have felt  
so cheap you could buy me all night three  
for a dime for we had moved in  
right beside where she has but she  
haven't mowed. That bitch. Or weeded neither  
so he does and now she finds time to visit,  
when I am away. Well, one thing lead

to another and I do not hold  
where he is wrong in his mind  
for I have had my own life  
of mingling in the wrong crowd  
plus I am not perfect and I had not loved  
anyone in the longest period.  
Well, one day I had arrived at home  
to where he had thrown his clothes in the bath  
and himself in to follow for he was dirty as a shoe.  
Well, one thing lead to another and I am washing  
his parts when he would have the intention  
of a pharmaceutical matter or if I would fetch him a beer.  
Then, Honey, would you scratch my feet and knees.  
Well, I would have liked to poke a stick  
to his eye but with my bread  
on the side of which it is buttered  
I can't complain.

RESPOND BOX 393

Festivals, music, stock cars, quiet times.  
I am not opposed to bowling  
and I will have only a slight amount if  
there is a racket or noise upstairs in a late period  
or out which a pleasant gin or modest rum.  
In my case, I would prefer to engage  
in personalities and get a good fulfillment there.  
As for me, you could say I live alone  
with my other son  
who has got his diploma,  
a guarantee of a job if he would get one.  
As for me I would prefer to engage  
in sharing so you would "like or enjoy" mini golf  
or darts and cards and he, you,  
the man, dentist, genius, business executive,  
aristocracy.  
You would not be a menace  
but he would be a gentleman: high quality,  
is decent, no convictions please, plus  
he would have a good intention



to keep his nose clean and he would be a gentleman  
in how it takes place, picnic, ride a boat, go out.  
Well, that's about it. Well,  
as for me I keep myself as high  
as possible in excellent moral values  
and you would say I am lying about my age.

### **Bruce Bond**

#### LESTER YOUNG

Just why he flared his tenor to the side,  
head cocked, reed-clamp twisted in its neck,  
why he bore the bell's weight in one hand—

hours on end he braced it there—as the other  
fluttered over the low valves, his cool  
resolve flush with wind...no one ever knew.

Sure, there were theories: for the timbre,  
the women; as he put it, *for the birds*.  
Each night his sax's bella donna floated

over the fire of tones he would never match,  
never could, however many reeds he cut;  
something in his tenor dreamt it was a flute,

lithe and buoyant, a horizon in his lips.  
And when he sank into solos, his head  
heavy, bemused, you could spot the black

stones of his eyes, gin-soaked and gleaming;  
discouragement or desire, he drowned it  
in music: sluggish grains of jailtime, slip-

knots in a woman's gaze, one day's rhythm  
of Pall Malls and minor cash going through him,  
or the huge sums to young tenors who copped

entire lines he played; even music itself,  
his saxophone shushing the world-shore,  
drowned in the sea of a larger music.

With every spark that pinned a tie or cuff,  
he wrapped himself in flash like a magician's  
disappearing act. Final days in a bed

at the Alvin, high above the riff of traffic,  
it took a stack of LP's to put him under...  
that and the wide-eyed lights of the room.

Death was a flair of embittered birds borne up  
by gravity. Who could hear him and not love  
that sound, the way it lingers, how he raised

a stamen at phrase's end: who wouldn't eat  
the lotus blooming there; with every record  
a widened pupil falling on its spindle.



TROPHIES

Any lost citizen of the wild  
wandering our land didn't live very long.  
Most, for instance, were consumed  
but a few selected and undressed  
to brighten the west side of the shed.  
Nailed in place, a badger skull grins.  
Three, five and seven point racks  
weather in the light to the color of salt.  
Jawbones like lopsided boomerangs  
gnaw the wood whenever the wind blows.

Realize here lives our heritage  
of uncles and fathers and sons  
haphazardly decorating the rough plank,  
our tribute to generations of game  
brought down by generations of men.  
Admire the magpies' ingenuity  
at cleansing every morsel of gristle,  
every speck of sinew and tendon  
from the antlers' distorted tree  
and the fierce arrangement of skulls.

Realize here lives only a fraction  
of the legacy, the customary violence  
which men hand down to younger men,  
nothing here to illustrate the efficiency  
of skewering salmon with a pitchfork  
or even dynamiting them to the surface,  
of blasting a bobcat off a power pole  
with the neighbor's semi-automatic rifle,  
of snaring mink or cottontails that screamed  
until silenced, then skinned and stewed.

Realize looking upon this wall  
is like reading of an ingenious tradition  
etched in the grooves and hollows,  
the dimples and sockets of every skull and bone,  
in every fleck of paint and splinter of wood

or like browsing a museum from the beginning  
when running the trap line was a gesture  
of love between fathers and sons,  
when a kill shot would determine  
who was the better man.

MEMORY IS LIGHT THE COLOR OF NICKEL

For a drink, neighbors tell of witnessing light  
from a blast worse than any they can remember  
that threw a man all the way across his shop.  
They thought it was crazy to braze that fuel drum,  
to think he knew the ways of diesel and flame.

What I remember best is my father warning,  
*Now don't look at the light*, though he must  
have known I would itch to memorize  
that voltage lunging between his hands  
and charging the rod to bead and meld

something broken over time, that nickel light  
trembling the shadow which loomed up behind him,  
that welder humming like the hive pelted to a frenzy,  
and the cold quality of acetylene reaffirming itself  
deep within the angry buzz of my adolescence.

I sweat like a man hired the dog days of summer  
to chop a cord of wood, and I try not to imagine  
how the ghosts of the neighbor boys hovered above  
the accident scene, unsure of whether to hold on  
to the lives they once knew or follow the light.

## YOUR LIFE AS FOUND IN A TOOLBOX

Everything necessary to maintain  
every foundation ever built so far  
is found simply by fondling the latch,  
as easily as recalling an unfond past,  
and then by handling each orderly tray  
of tools too simple to call hand tools:  
a stick of chalk meant for marking  
the measure of almost anything  
from concrete to an assortment  
of planks sorted out as useless;  
that yellow Stanley measuring tape  
used to measure what used to matter;  
and one lead stone to plumb the line,  
much like a fisherman's sinker or fob,  
and gauge the point of vanishing.

Dig much deeper to find those  
lining the bottom that fit the hands  
perfectly of any man who constructs  
a reluctant living with his hands:  
the square a clumsy boomerang  
perfect at setting the record straight;  
a claw hammer meant to hammer  
whatever it can to your expectations,  
then claw them apart on second thought;  
and finally, ultimately, the spirit level  
with its single, jaundiced eye  
leveled expectantly in your direction  
and rolling whenever you breathe,  
the only bubble in the world  
that won't burst at the slightest breath.

## VISITATION FROM THE NORTH

It rests a paw heavy over your heart,  
a sign, you think, of threat or affection.  
It rests its jaw upon the other pillow  
and growls premonitions of the north:

the brown trout found dead in pond ice,  
a raccoon's hand gnawed from the trap.  
It strokes your cheek with a tongue  
like a slab of salmon, pink and reeking,

until you dream of plunging through  
a weak spot in the snow's frozen crust  
down into the ripe dark of an ancient den,  
buried with this dream for all of winter.

### *Jarold Ramsey*

## SIGNAGE

On a Route 390 overpass  
for all the northbound world to see  
in yellow three-foot strokes  
KERRY I LOVE YOU—MIKE  
I love you both whatever happened  
even if Kerry now takes another route  
to work and Mike now rues his reckless artistry  
hanging over the railing after midnight  
painting his heart out upside down and backwards  
the true posture of love

**Elizabeth McLagan**

THE TOURIST OF DESIRE

I will probably never be a whale, though I have  
seen them mating (you may have too), perhaps on Sunday  
nights, idly sipping wine and listening to music, one of  
those pieces  
for solo violin where Bach forgets his duty to God  
and lets the violin follow its intemperate longing.

The T.V.'s mute and tuned to PBS, where it's always  
Nature. Whales were cows once: imagine them  
in the surf like a bunch of tourists, falling in love  
with the sea, and here they are, two shadowed immensities  
slurring the light, and a third thing like a dark rope

appearing between them. You wish you had popped in a blank  
tape so you could savor the moment: it must have taken  
hours, days of lurking under the whales,  
salt sucking pores and the human breath breaking  
against them to capture this uncoiling.

And in Prague at a monastery, books  
stacked to the ceiling, the room roped off, you  
can only gaze blankly at the ceiling fresco,  
"The Struggle of Mankind to Know Real History,"  
and of course you want to know it too. In a side aisle,

among shells and a desiccated turtle, the actual whalish thing:  
a long unjointed arm narrowed to a thumb. Form follows  
function, and you imagine the moment: how it hesitates,  
caresses, then levers across the mountainous flesh  
to find its little cave. Of course there's a sign (don't touch):

can't you see the girls like startled swans hurrying past  
in clumps, the school boys smirking, what else  
to do but long to look and touch and be held, armless in  
blue water,

propelled by the long flex of the spine, why else does  
the violin,  
each stroke smoking with rosin, drive that music into  
our veins?

**Tom Hansen**

NO LEAVES

This time I promise. Not even one  
green on the tree or dead on the ground  
or midway almost suspended in air,  
though it is October and cold and so full of wind  
the moon last night went to bed in the river,  
and walking the dog this morning  
in the leftover dark before daylight  
I heard the cackling cry of the dead  
with every blindfolded step.  
But I have promised. Not one.

You are half my age and live in a country  
I have been exiled from,  
where it is summer (July, I think)  
and the fierce sun beats down,  
or where it is no season ever,  
for weather is a religion I don't believe  
you observe: the wind merely wind —  
a joy, a nuisance — but never a messenger  
sent to tell you what you are ready  
at last to hear.

For now I give you the slant light of autumn:  
gold beaten so fine  
whatever it touches secretly shimmers.  
It hangs in the air for one little moment,  
forever October.



ELEGY: PRELUDES

ASHES, ASHES

Things fall out of the tv. Out of  
the newspaper, the sugar bowl.  
Figures rush from burning houses,

some without coats or shoes.  
My mother's mouth craters with fear.  
She grips the chair, her screams

undoing like rain in wind. No matter  
that it's a calm spring afternoon,  
that the only threats lie within her,

old woman with dementia in a blue chair  
in California. The news from there  
is the same: fear, ruin, the brain

running out on itself like someone  
running from a burning house,  
eyes already full of ash.

ROPE TOSS

My mother stares out the high windows.  
Clouds menace, drag her toward  
smoke water. *Watch out!* She grabs

for me like rope as I try to reassure her.  
Her bad ear takes my words,  
turns them inside-out, upside down,

looking for a fit. *Oh, she says, really?*  
*Imagine!* Her old ruse for hiding  
that the words are blurred.

But it's her only ruse.  
*Why do we keep holding hands?*  
Quavering. *Are we lost?*

LOST INVENTORY

Another day. Everything's on the bed,  
the contents of her dresser, purse,  
the old red wallet that she shakes:

*They've stolen every bloomin' cent.*  
I tell her it's safer to keep  
money in the bank, then begin

putting everything away. She peers  
as if I'm their conspirator,  
whispers into her hand.

NIGHT FOOD

I dream, needing to be where  
night is not. *She has no profile*  
says the one beside me in the boat.

No one known by land. Someone  
who feeds me sweet milk,  
sings through my skin.

THE SEVERING

When the dog brought the pig's head  
from the farm across the street and dropped it  
on the back walk, it was mid-summer, warm  
even deep at night, so by dawn the flies  
were already stirring their hard bodies  
toward it. By the time I came out to shake  
crumbs from the tablecloth, the head moved  
like a live thing with their gorging.

The dog lay unroused by all the buzzing,  
himself gorged on brain and blood.  
I didn't scream. I draped the cloth  
over the porch rail and went down  
to squat beside the thing. I took a stick  
from the lawn, poked a little, making

flies swirl up like smoke and settle back.  
The dog watched through a barely open eye.

A stupid dog, who the week before had herded  
the Hannos' cows onto the farmhouse porch,  
then sat and barked as they clattered back  
and forth, their blank eyes spinning wild.  
I poked some more and saw a pig eye  
missing. The cut-off veins and gristle  
clotted over bones I didn't know enough  
anatomy to name. I waited there

as if for revelation. Inside the house,  
the man I claimed to love had finished  
with his coffee. I heard the water rinse  
his cup, heard the click that lit another  
cigarette. Then nothing but the flies  
moving like a heavy dream you know  
you'll keep the feel of when you wake.  
I touched the small red branches

of a vein high on my thigh, first sign  
my legs were ageing. Sometimes his tongue  
moved there, moved slowly there, in ragged  
circles—like the flies I brushed at then in quick  
revulsion, standing as I threw the stick,  
dizzying just as he came down the steps.  
*What in hell*, he said, and went to get a shovel.  
That afternoon a downpour washed away the stain.

I could tell you I dreamed the severed head,  
sign of what I knew I had to do. But it was real,  
as real as all my lies there, where I lived  
another dozen years, dreaming of another  
life, one that wouldn't cut me off from what  
I longed for. As if a life were not continuous  
with longing. As if I'd ever stop those years  
from meaning all they do beyond their severing.

## WEIGHT

He was drawn by the fire.  
He loved the word *molten*.  
He didn't know what else to tell her.  
There would be work, people wanted railings,  
chairs, sconces. And there was power  
in making it: *wrought* iron.

So he left every morning at dawn.  
So much for their love-making then.  
And at night he was too tired, or his hands  
still too full of fire, he said.  
She knew this was a way of saying  
the other thing he couldn't say:  
her body had become fearful to him.  
It was perfectly normal, with its breasts and slits,  
its curves. So it could be any woman's.  
Could be his mother's?  
How could he be sure of anything,  
he said. The next week he began

to bring home little twists and turns  
of iron, lay them on the table.  
*They'd make wonderful paperweights*, she said  
one night, but as usual put them  
in an old tin in the pantry.  
She had already begun to lie  
beside him perfectly  
still, like paper.

**Oliver Rice**

HOW ETHOLOGICAL ARE THESE PILASTERS

Oh, Rebecca, heavy lady in the midtown throng,  
how nostalgic are these facades,  
these turrets and these porticos.

Oh, Charlie, missing person on the museum steps,  
heir to Georgian maxims and Romanesque wiles,  
how artifactual are these fenestrations,  
these flutings and these campaniles.

Oh, Sean and Yoko and Ed,  
telecrew at the scene of the news,  
upon whom the annals have devolved, rococo and baroque,  
how documentary are these totems of glass and steel,  
these coppered finials and these gilded domes.

Oh, Alicia, skipping rope in the indigent street,  
receiver of fables, Ionian and Gothic and cubist,  
how genealogical are these pediments,  
these friezes of garlands and cupids,  
these cornices and these balustrades.

**Susan Blackwell Ramsey**

POMEGRANATE

is what she told the painters  
she wanted her dining room. Not cinnabar,  
not cowardly salmon or high terra-cotta.  
And they would go on trying till she got it.

Anyone buying into this neighborhood  
should insist on a clause which stipulates  
the seller must move five hundred miles away,  
a ten year margin before she can return.

Instead, they move two blocks and monitor  
what She is doing to My house.  
Conversely, new owners hardly cross the threshold  
before they lift a leg and mark it Mine

by stripping wallpaper, carpets, cabinet doors.  
Interior decoration as aggression,  
so administered and so received,  
peeing in the granary, shitting upstream.

So now, two families later, probably  
that dining room's declined to Whisper Beige,  
Raw Linen, Oystershell, Almond or Sand.  
Something understated, tasteful, safe.

Two painters quit, one of them in tears,  
one went insane, one ran away, one died,  
but for a while that room had walls the color  
of the heart's impulse to hospitality.



*Cheryl Penner*

TREES

Trees have become empty of meaning and messages  
Have given up their crusade for comfort  
No longer bend down with offerings

Trees have forgotten how to measure the children

Trees are nearer than ever to the answer  
Have quit opening their heavy coats to the disbelievers

Trees have forgotten your dreams  
No longer refuse to lie down with their enemies

They can't recall the last time they gave birth  
No longer ask to be told the story of oceans  
Would rather not give their blessing

Trees tell themselves that meadows will always remember  
Have stopped washing their hair in the rivers

Trees will no longer come back for you on the long quiet road  
Will no longer hush their rustlings before the rain comes  
Have given up waiting for the party to begin

Trees in their sadness tell the evening to get lost  
Disguise their longing by showing off their trinkets

They no longer perfume your bed with their branches  
Have lost faith in steady rain

They dream of sheets flapping in innocent breezes  
Can't bring themselves to make peace with water  
No longer cradle your aimless wanderings

Trees can't help but envy your undisturbed slumber  
Have become clever, and lift up their dresses at a moment's notice

Trees and brooms are at yet another impasse

Trees are tired of propping up your nostalgia  
Have become tongue-in-cheek regarding snowfall  
Now see the sunrise as heavy handed

They no longer nod as you trip up the sidewalk  
Have become simple-minded, bearing smooth lozenges rather  
than peaches

Trees weep for other trees

Trees have removed their shoes at the door  
Have bent over backwards on your behalf  
Have used up their courage

Trees no longer remember what came before wind  
Are ashamed to admit that they should have listened to the stars

Trees whisper all night of when to set sail

POLICY FOR LONELY HEARTS

*Please advise us of your progress.*

—State Farm Insurance

Dear Owner,  
your house is in sad  
need of repair. The porch railing  
is missing teeth, and moss  
grows bright green  
from the shingles. Last year's leaves  
sag the gutters. Please cut away  
all branches that snag  
visitors, the loopholes  
of their eyes. Your hedges are unsightly,  
lumpy cousins—we've noticed  
cats and squirrels  
avoid them. Also, winter promises  
a nasty fall  
on those front steps. We'd advise  
that you take pains  
and scrape encrusted eggs  
from Halloweens long past  
off the robin-blue walls. Remember,  
your home is your castle. For coverage  
to continue, you must  
show more care. Plant a red garden.  
Find a wife and spruce up  
the place with children. We don't believe  
there's time to spare. We don't believe  
in time alone. The ladder  
leaning forlornly in the eaves  
depresses us. You are not yet  
lost—see how the shells  
of passing cars throw light  
off your rattletrap windows?

THE LIST

Those five nickels from her husband:  
each one minted in a different year —  
the year they met, the year they married,  
the good years which brought children —  
what kind of a woman loses something like that?

Or loses the bleached-out bones of a seal —  
a white rib, a skull — washed up on the sand  
at Neah Bay, taken home for the mantel?  
How could those just disappear?  
The list grows to include the sound

of moving water, and to include precision,  
for it is more precisely the sound of an ocean  
which is lost, and then the taste of salt  
on someone's lips as well as the sense  
of who that someone was. Soon the list

fills a page, then pages: all the lost items  
are somewhere. Or no place at all,  
which is not where anything belongs.  
And what kind of world is this, she wonders,  
where everything we look for is gone?

COUNTING SONG

One sun. Two pillows on a bed.  
Three children grown  
and gone, their leaving left  
four-seasons-in-a-row  
in rows, left the table set  
for years. *What do I do now?*  
*Five fingers made a hand.* Forget  
the body as a home,

forget the head. Instead,  
count six beans sown,  
The Dipper's seven stars, eight sad  
dogs gnawing their own bones,  
nine snakes coiling, ten skins shed.

**Robert Grunst**

Three Poems

FROM EVERLASTING TO EVERLASTING

—for Agnes Delacruz

Three layers of shingles, roof boards, beams  
and stringers, plaster, faded draperies,  
the red carpet from the sanctuary...  
Agnes Delacruz the demolition crew loaded  
your old church onto the backs of trucks.  
Errant rosary beads, kneelers, water-warped  
hymnals, cracked pews the antique dealers  
would not buy are smoking in the county dump.  
A *Caterpillar* tractor's standing by to turn  
the heap and keep it burning. Who did you  
pray for at the altar rail in your black dress?  
A sister and three nieces living still  
in Mexico; for hands from heaven to set  
tassels to the corn of Oaxaca, for breath  
to blow the pollen clouds row to row?  
Did you pray for a longer green season,  
yellow blossoms, fields going mad with pickles  
for your son and his work: ten hour shifts,  
seven days a week, all that overtime  
for your torero astride his hi-lo charging  
forks-full around blind corners of the biggest  
pickle plant in the world? Movers wrapped  
your blue Madonna in canvas, bore her  
corpse-like to the heaven of the rectory  
basement along with Saint Joseph, Saint  
Francis de Sales, and the monsignor's

three illegal sets of studded tires. They snuffed  
all your blue-glass vigil lights and scrapped  
the iron stand. I think of your black shoes,  
leather cut out in spots so you could  
walk with dignity, so knots disfiguring  
your feet could not interfere. Your black  
veil. Choir practice in the loft. My lost  
soprano voice. My looking down  
on you. Someone must have died you loved.  
Someone always has: has loved and loved  
and wept. Someone sings and sings  
to assuage sorrow. Voices crack. Grackles  
go wild, attracted by infatuating glints  
of color in this holy land of Michigan.  
They swerve and smash through  
stained glass, once-only wrecking balls  
entering consecrated space with so little  
preparation, with no time for surprise.  
I will love you always, Agnes Delacruz.

YELLOW TUMBLERS

—*Hier gaan we dan.*

What we never figured out was how she climbed  
Those steps, a stairway narrowly built,  
Saving space below for sorting tulip bulbs  
She sealed in sacks for September sales;  
Space for an old Deere tractor, disk harrow,  
Wagon, barrels filled with forks her workers  
Used to turn up bulbs. At Tulip Time  
Her fields were blocks of color. You paint  
Them in. She loved more what happened  
After heavy rains. All those heart-shaped petals  
Dropped along the rows, blowzy streaks of red,  
Yellow, magenta, spilled cream. That perfume  
Reminded her of her Netherlands, she said.  
The silo's wooden cap was falling in.  
She came down with polio when she was eight.  
Mornings when she'd hang her wash,



Reaching as she had to like a supplicant  
Who clearly understands what she's done  
Wrong, ours was the guilt of watching  
Her in secret, lying in our bed.  
After she pinned the last sheet,  
Pillow case, or stocking, she'd disappear  
Into the barn. In her absence, we lay waiting  
For nineteen yellow tumblers.  
Somehow she'd hoist herself up onto the floor  
Above her bulbs, into ceremonious  
Cooing, into a bowing congress of pigeons.  
We said she must call first, *Here we go!*  
In Dutch and pull a rope, springing  
A trap door, setting her birds free.  
And she'd watch them through her windows:  
Diamonds cut out of boards below  
The silo's ruined cap: All those otherwise  
Good for nothing mica-winged  
Pigeons, all the exotic crossings of tulips,  
All the colors changing in her dreams, executing  
Wild mid-flight somersaults, braking  
Against nothing, performing lovely tucks  
And vaults above her lots and rows. All that art,  
All that purely extravagant breeding!

## GOLDENROD GALLS

This afternoon the stars are burning as ever. As ever  
it's a long climb. Who wouldn't love once to hear

the music of the elements, each absolute pitch, harmonies  
defined by the din? Just now though I'll take these small

tokens: a downy woodpecker, a snowy field filled  
with stalks of goldenrod, and the swellings on the stalks,

tumors really, outsides tanned and shellacked  
against weather, insides filled with white placental cake

which swelled around the eggs of a parasitic fly. All of this  
begins in summer. The flies prick open the new stems

and deposit their eggs. The eggs incubate at the centers  
of the stems. The goldenrods' star-shaped flowers

turn their perennial gold. The eggs hatch. The larvae  
fill with all the sweetness of the world. They orbit

around themselves in succulent darkness. There must be  
still another music that downy woodpeckers hear.

Afternoons like this we see them flicking through the stands  
of goldenrod, clinging to stems, taking surveys of galls,

servants to nothing but their own connoisseurship, the wintry  
bouquets of galls, pipings and scratchings of fat grubs

eating cake soaked in milk, and the holes the woodpeckers  
drill through to the chambers within are perfectly functional,

as is the downy's flight, as is the music of feathers:  
such impeccable navigation, one golden gall to the next.

**Tania Runyan**

MY FATHER WANTS ME TO BUY A TELESCOPE

For his life has been lost  
in time. What does sixty-three matter  
when Jupiter storms for millennia?  
In his backyard observatory nine states away,  
black bins and tubes  
swivel from the concrete  
in slow supplication to the sky.  
He knows his place among the stars  
is small. Watching them  
allows him infinity.

I told him, sure, I might like one  
someday. Now his letters arrive  
on the week, abounding with aperture,  
T-rings and deep sky objects.  
He forwards catalogs, prints online diagrams  
of Dobs and refractors.  
I cannot even identify  
the North Star; I just heard  
the red spot vanished  
years ago. But I am halfway lost  
in this sudden, strange force,  
the madness that makes him  
warn in a voice I never heard,  
*Be patient, honey. Buying a scope  
too quickly is expecting the universe  
to give up its secrets easily.*

He used to shun mystery.  
He used to down beer  
while building miniature freight trains  
that looped the garage endlessly.  
When I was little, he left me  
quiet in my room, but now  
he cannot stop speaking

of my need for distant galaxies.  
*Linger in astronomy stores.  
Be recognized at the planetarium.  
Get invited to star parties,*  
where for hours they wait in silence  
for the green fires of hidden  
constellations to descend  
through the trees.  
And when I finally get a scope  
of my own, I must not lug it  
grudgingly from the closet  
and demand the stars,  
but assemble it with reverence  
and wait for the darkness.  
When the Lagoon Nebula  
whirls in the eyepiece  
like an electric sea, I will forget  
the daily movements of my life.

It will be years  
before I can afford one,  
but I will stack his letters and catalogs  
with reverence, hang the photo  
of his stately pose by a giant  
Schmidt-Cassegrain. I'll memorize  
charts, rub shoulders, crash  
star parties, stand in the dark.  
I will wait  
so I can tell him  
what I see.

**Valerie L. Egar**

SIX POSTCARDS AND AN OBSERVATION

A Cairo evening. In the souk, flasks of perfumed oil.  
White water lilies next to gutted fish. Overripe  
peaches fill the air with a bloom of flies and sweet  
rotting flesh. A dark man presses me, *Look! Look!*  
At the rugs. At the scarabs. At the blind child at his feet.  
Every phrase of Arabic is a locked question.

*How you going to pay?* is the question.  
The car smokes at the side of a Jersey road. Oil  
slicks the pavement. He leans on the truck, stares at his feet,  
waits for an answer. I'm a stranger, stranded and ripe  
for the taking. *Visa. Mastercard.* I open my wallet. *Look.*  
He lowers the hook. The breeze from the marsh smells sweet.

Piano and trumpet swells spill into the street. *Sweet*  
*Jesus!* Saturday night in Key West. Tonight, every question  
is a question for tomorrow. The sax sounds fine. I look  
through a cracked window. A girl dances. Her sweat is oil  
of sandalwood. Every spin throws a trail of ripe  
suggestion at her man's jitterbugging feet.

Malaise and the headache that comes from being 12,000 feet  
above sea level. I sip tea made with *coca* leaves, sweet  
with honey. Cuzco, Peru. *Inca stronghold... ripe...  
silver... gold plundered... Pizarro.* Not one question  
for the guide. I hear her words through a coil  
of drugs and fatigue. But when I see the Quechua woman,  
I look.

Drive through the Pine Ridge Reservation and look  
at the fatal accident signs that line the highway. One  
every few feet.  
*X marks the spot.* The men drink wood alcohol,  
anti-freeze, oil  
of turpentine, and fly like eagles to meet a fleet

and bitter end. Sitting Bull died here. His brothers follow.  
No question  
though from the radio: In Bennett County, the wheat  
is ripe.

I hesitate. Is it open? The girl has eyes of a child, but a  
body ripe  
with puberty. She is wiping tables and has not learned  
the look  
that invites. Her mother yells at her in Creole. The girl's  
question  
is halting, in English she practices with the nuns. *Will you  
rest your feet?*  
It is morning, too early for my feet to be tired but I sit, order  
sweet  
croissants, café au lait. Already the day is awash in sun and  
tanning oil.

From the air, it's a different view. Oil refineries, lit like  
amusement parks. Ripe  
garbage barges skimming sweet water like bugs. People  
disappear. I look  
at an abstract 30,000 feet below and like the angels,  
haven't a question.



*HORUS NON NUMERO NISI SERENAS*

Most sundials are flat discs  
with a prong sticking out,  
a gnomon, a shadow-caster  
at any given moment  
preventing that moment  
from seeing the sun.

Most suns are spherical gaseous  
flame-storms in whose light  
the sundial is obliged to teach  
by darkness, and whose heat  
prevents close argument.

Most arguments, like most sundials,  
stick up for themselves.  
Otherwise, where would they be?  
Most are circular:  
hop in anytime. Hop in anywhere.

THE WAY THAT YOU SAY IT

"Too smooth," she says,  
speaking of the chicken sausage,  
how it's ground too fine—  
a good sausage ought to have  
some variation in it,  
some coarseness of texture—

but I think for a moment  
she means something else:  
the waiter, the wine, both  
syrupy, the music  
oozing out of concealment  
in the ceiling, the marriage;

amazing how many  
nouns come swarming  
like kids to the ice-cream truck  
at the sound of a single  
attractive adjective.  
But she wouldn't just let it  
slide out like that: she'd

put a pause in,  
a hesitation. She'd be at  
more pains to show me  
how the words have awkward,  
uncomfortable edges. How they could  
catch in a person's throat—

WHILE YOU WAIT

A new book's always  
coming out as if  
last week's won't  
work now. About  
how to breathe. About  
cats. Insatiable  
appetites you might say  
but what other kinds  
*are* there? Or should be.  
Or obsolescence. As if as  
soon as it's in  
print it begins  
degrading: true. That  
telephone books appear  
no more than yearly's  
merely an artifact  
of reproduction  
Ditto the dictionary.  
A stricture electronic  
listings are not  
subject to. Where  
formerly, delete one

name from a page  
or add one and it's  
cut and paste; four  
names in sequence,  
bang goes the book.  
The brain can open  
room up and close  
space as fast as  
thought or better:  
without thought. Almost  
so too the processor.  
Being nonmechanical.  
No stones, no trees.  
No changes to breathing  
or cats have occurred  
in recorded memory,  
only approaches to,  
the writing down of,  
codification. Which  
itself promotes.  
Unwritten laws last  
best. Write it, regret it.  
Regret it, revise it.  
Give baby a name.  
Relax, my wife says.  
I *am* relaxed. Like the cat:  
just look at him. Don't touch.

## **Robert Bense**

### CHEROKEE REMOVAL

Rattle of broken milkweed pods.  
Frosted squash vines.  
Soldiers rasping hands  
over fire. Tamped earth,  
red dust silting the pine.  
A nation taken prisoner.  
Five tribes stockaded. In the cold  
cattle and horses stiffening.  
Soldiers in the rearguard  
torching house and barn.  
Timbers sparking high  
in the night sky. Lame horses.  
A partial trust in the upturned  
faces of oxen.  
Dogs in a sniff hunting  
food. Fighting off buzzards  
along the trail. The dying  
and the dead dropped off,  
wrapped in blankets.  
Soldiers riding escort.  
The living will walk  
a thousand miles, marched  
to the river, and Green's Ferry.  
To the slow beginning west.  
Ice hanging in the trees.  
A girl who was three years old—  
writing in a book of remembrances  
at Cape Girardeau *I cried  
only once I think. They took  
my father. How to forget,  
I'm almost the last.*  
Winter of 1838 swallowed  
in the hugeness of America.  
Blind gut of the river.  
The river remembers nothing.

## Molly Tenenbaum

### WHAT THE PSYCHIC SAID

This is not your era.  
You are kneeling in a garden.  
Yet, you've more to learn from him.  
In the doorway of a house you stand, not rich or poor.  
Solitude blurs edges, I can't see  
if someone else is there.

This is not your era, that's why  
you can't find a job.  
Behind waving grapevines, foreground dazed  
with roses, your shirt's work-blue  
slivers up and down, the lush closing over.  
You grow wider in empathy, straighter in reason,  
but these are not your true directions.  
Gold rooms and dim ones parquet the house,  
and far, through the honey of dust-crust windows,  
skyscrapers sway, silver horses.  
Say he never came back. Would you still  
love to be alone?

You should have lived in the 30s, 40s, I'm not sure, but back  
when women could do what they wanted when no one was looking.  
Now everyone looks all the time.  
The job was to boil summer jam.  
The job was to gather windfalling walnuts, fruit and hips  
like breaking coins around you.  
What if you stopped naming difference, he's this, you're that —  
oh, I see, difference weaves a willow fence  
your solitude grazes in, nibbling grass from the hedges.  
Were you to pass through an illness, sheets flat  
as if no thickness lay under them, suddenly  
you'd know what you loved.  
Afternoon blinding the house,  
east wall, west wall, corner to corner.  
Where are you going, putting on your shoes? Why take your coat

from the entry closet and button it up? He gave you  
a pin of kissing faces molded together, glowing on the collar.  
You must be either completely alone or wholly one with another.

White smudgy bloom on purple grapes, the drizzling roses.  
If you are a moon and empathy is light,  
how full before you break?  
In the house, the sun spools everywhere, and you could sit  
in one place forever, no hours passing.  
Money is irrelevant, and this is why the day  
you enter, house-door pressed shut behind you,  
feels abstract, lines drawn with straight-edge, protractor.  
Except your high school geometry teacher  
said *steakmeat* and *raisin* for *statement* and *reason*,  
so your answers taste like mince.  
Solitude is a castle — whether you're rinsing  
the dishes or kissing your love, always you walk  
on the ramparts, eyes brushed by night's rushing wings.

You belong where you can step  
from the house in your bathrobe, ripening  
grapes at your cheek, roses  
in lullabies soft at your shoulder.  
A figure stands by you, the shape of a man,  
but you see grass through him,  
he has never grown real, and this  
is your lifelong sorrow.  
You cannot sit anywhere for long, time simmering  
sunsets in shatters. God's roiling voice  
boomed down *Buy a ticket*  
to the man crying *Why can't I win?*, but you, at a table, you make  
your own ticket, a painting of everything: borders, thicketts,  
bluebells, oaks, ponds, oxbows, lips, elbows,  
dangles, triangles, Jack-in-the-pulpit, love-in-a-mist,  
Orion, the Pleiades, Oregon, Piper Creek watershed,  
kitchen shelves,  
mugs, and two yolk-yellow egg-cups. If I asked you  
right now,  
what would you say is your deepest pleasure?  
A funnel of late orange light glows around you, and  
no one else is there.

*Karen Glenn*

NIGHT FISHING

Lantern scans, a searchlight  
over water. My father and I  
are floundering. I am twelve.  
He's just returned from war games  
in Japan. We walk  
in Neuse River water, metal gigs  
in hand, searching for the tell-tale shapes  
of flounder. For camouflage, they bury  
themselves in sand. Still  
their outlines give these fish away,  
like a girl's small breasts  
against an outgrown sweater.

I feel lost. He's been gone  
two years, is as strange to me  
as the metal poles we carry,  
poles designed to stab.

The wind is hot. The stars  
outline the sky in constellations.  
I am afraid. I don't want  
to find the fish. I would not have the heart  
to lift the gig. I scuff  
through water, stirring sand.

My father sees. He starts  
to sing. He kicks up  
sand like I do. He takes  
my hand. We splash, we shuffle  
through the swirling water.

The fish are safe. And I am safe.  
The moon shines. The lantern shines.  
The water shines. My father and I  
are going home.

*Chris Dahl*

THE GOVERNING BODY

Tonight the Chinese emperor will sleep  
with the 47th concubine. The night after,  
the 54th.

Two court ladies  
trail bushes through special red ink  
and frown over their task of scheduling.  
There is magic to consider,  
pregnancies, the monthly bleeding  
and the compounding of the yin essence  
through the proper ratio (concubine  
to 3rd wife, 2nd, consort)  
required for the emperor  
to honor the empress  
on this month's most  
auspicious day.

The emperor broods over the silence  
of the general he's sent to Ha-rien  
to suppress the uprising.  
Two eunuchs in his bedchamber shake out  
the straw matting and arrange  
silk covers. Entering her bath  
the 47th concubine dreams  
she will please the emperor, will be favored.  
She pinches  
her crooked tooth  
between her knuckle and thumb. No matter  
how often she tries, it will not twist straight.  
Still, she is almost beautiful, her hair  
ruffling about her face  
with the awkwardness of a young crow.  
One of the lucky ones  
she has already slept with the emperor  
once this year. She was a virgin then,  
a young girl just sent



from the newly conquered Northern province.  
Since, she has studied  
the manual of various positions, kisses.  
She wonders if she'll be brave enough  
to try the butterfly caress  
on the emperor's male member.

The emperor rubs at his eyes with the palms of his hands.  
He would like to sleep.  
But he must see to this border agreement  
with the northern horse people. And decide  
what to send the King  
of the southern peninsula in return  
for the royal elephant.  
And he really must send a runner  
to chastise his general (why  
is there no word?).  
And discuss with the feng-shui expert  
the proper siting for his burial tomb.

The younger of the eunuchs lays out  
the sleeping robe while the elder,  
with great difficulty, pees  
through a quill. The younger runs his hands  
over intimate stitches.  
Seventeen women  
and half a year's time to suggest  
the subtle passage of dragons  
from faded earth to the deeper blue heaven  
of the emperor's shoulders.

The 47th concubine rises and extends her right hand.  
She receives a silver ring  
to wear into the bedchamber. Tomorrow  
it will be moved to her left hand.  
If she conceives, she may replace it  
with gold. She could give birth  
to the next emperor!

The emperor sighs and walks toward the far room

leaving the candle flickering.  
The young eunuch opens carefully the small box  
where he keeps his most  
precious treasure: the dried buttons  
of his testicles and penis. He satisfies himself  
he will be buried as  
a whole man.  
In Ha-rien the general has been slaughtered  
and the army retreats.  
The 47th concubine steps into an empty corridor  
on her way to climb  
a vermilion staircase.

The red-stained brushes schedule  
the 12th day following the next full moon  
for the 3rd wife of the 2nd rank.

## About Our Contributors

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David Wagoner  
Editor



