



Poetry

NORTHWEST

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Editor
David Wagoner

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POETRY NORTHWEST

WINTER 2001

R.T. Smith Three Poems

THAT ART MIGHT SAVE A FEW

Miss Harkness, bless her spindly frame
and icy hair, said poetry would make us more
alive, but we swapped gossip or watched the rain

graying the windows. A gentle spinster
thin as a mummy, she was the color
of faded paper and flinched like a bird.

She insisted Dickinson made poems from rigor
and need and a perfect spark. The words
had a lovers' quarrel with one another.

She called our famous recluse "Miss Emily"
and said the dark would soon be after us,
and we'd better lay aside dry tinder

for those times. We thought it made no sense
when she said those poems were precise
as a silver pillbox, that each one held a tempest.

We passed notes and whispered until the lights
flickered in the aftermath of thunder.
"Study the diction," she advised and smiled,

ignoring the blackout, the ripping weather.
We hummed with the restlessness of a swarm.
"A quartz contentment," "how frugal the chariot."

She winked and said, "Acquire the appetite,"
said we should offer poems nothing less than our
most devout attention, if we would know the fire

from the alarm. And the sentences, "embraced
with a thinking heart," might yet render us
the most splendid animals in the storm.

CHARLENE SPERRY ON SAFE BEAUTY

What I imbibe is a Virgin Mary—
Tomato juice, Tabasco and a stalk of celery.
No vodka, so I can watch the world clearly.

From what I see, this life is bloody
and dirty enough without whiskey,
which is alcohol and might explode.

And dancing's as bad. You breathe deep
and sweat like when you're angry
or in lust. It makes you look cheap,

except the waltz and Texas two-step,
where you touch, but just barely.
Mostly hands. I won't paint my lips

or let my skirt slip above my knees.
No smoking, pool shooting or dirty
words. That pink in my cheeks is me,

not rouge, and undyed hair is my glory.
It's no sin to be pert, but nothing coy
or skimpy or too tight. Don't worry,

I'm not the type to judge others harshly.
That would be a sorry twist. I testify
for Jesus when I get a fellow eye to eye.

Like now. You know, it's a tragedy
how even good folks will sully
the precious gifts of the Lord—modesty

not the least. If they studied scripture
they'd know about the coming Rapture
and what the hungry Devil has in mind.

I've got six friends who agree exactly.
We get together every Tuesday
and call our clique Safe Beauty.

It's our Born Again self-defense,
but we also learned Christian karate
to keep our bones from harm. Good sense

tells us death happens. There's no drink
can change it. It was peach brandy
in fifths taught me that. Now I want to free

everybody from the pain. What do you think
evil is if not the lack of sympathy?
Your patrons—getting down or high or randy—

Need to sober up and quit this tomfoolery.
Lord, can't these poor people see
the world is an emergency?

VITAL SIGNS

Sound out here rides the wind, despite the trees.
A mile away, the highway sings its dirge.
A neighbor calls at night to say my dog

disturbs his sleeping, and while we're talking
he mentions the noise of morning passion.
His wife thought "the woman" might be dying.

They have no desire to intrude.
He says sex is natural by God's decree
and adds his own wife is hard of hearing.

She speaks loudly and shrill across the yard.
He asks her to keep it down if she can.
He just called, of course, to mention the dog,

But soon two grandsons will be in the house.
They have no desire to intrude.
"You know," he says, "I'm not eager to explain

the voices that speak of God just before
they scream." He laughs like the wind in the trees.
"I only crank my garden tiller

between nine a.m. and dark. Devotions
occupy the first hour of my day.
Other people's love is not my business.

We have no desire to intrude."
"Sounds out here ride the wind, despite the trees,"
I offer. "The dog? I can't govern its needs,

but I'll try to consider the sleep of others."
He wants to be an understanding neighbor,
to lend his ladders in any emergency.

He knows people who live in the country
have to fashion a neighborly peace.
A mile away, the highway drones its dirge.

I promise to move the dog's pen downwind,
to shut the windows, turn up the radio,
but yearn to advise he buy himself a hound

whose howl can ride the wind, despite the trees,
to ask his wife not to listen when sounds
of love-making sweeten the breeze,

though such serenade may be the best
gift I could offer a nervous neighbor.
I have no reason to intrude, but listen:

the highway, the crickets, a distant bird.
Even through the phone, a world is stirring.
Sound out here rides the wind, despite the trees.

Wesley McNair

CHARLES BY ACCIDENT

Named Charlie for the relaxed
companionship we expected,
he became Charles for his butler-like
obedience, though he went off-duty

the morning my wife walked back
from the mailbox watching him
toss what looked like a red sock
gloriously into the air,

seeing it was actually the cardinal
she had been feeding all winter.
Why did she scream like that
was the question his whole,

horrified body seemed to ask, just
before he disappeared, back soon
at the door, black coat, white collar,
all ready to serve us: who was

that other dog, anyway? Who,
on the other hand, was this one,
chosen at the pound for his breed
and small size, now grown into three

or four different kinds of large
dogs stuck together. It wasn't his fault,
of course, that in the end he wasn't
Charlie, or even, considering the way

he barked at guests and sniffed them,
Charles exactly. Besides, it couldn't
have been easy to be whatever
sort of dog he was. Part retriever,

he spent his winters biting ice,
and summers dirt out of his tufted paws.
Part Collie, all he ever got to herd
were two faux sheep: a wired-haired terrier

that bit him back and a cat that turned
and ran up trees. An accidental sheep-dog,
Charles by accident, and our dog only
after he'd been disowned, he understood

that life is all missed connections
and Plan B — the reason why, perhaps,
no one could quite pat him or say
good boy enough, and why sometimes,

asleep, he mourned, working his legs
as if running to a place he could never
reach, beyond Charles or any other
way we could think of to call him.

PAIN THINKS OF HISTORY

Pulling its arms to its rib cage Pain thinks
of a sea horse small as a fern thinks of ladders

and tombs thinks of ruin's architecture
the vertebra's neural arch the torn net the artifact

Pain thinks of history without landscape without
bone or infinitive Pain thinks of the cordoned papyrus

the first and last page Pain thinks of the cell's
enormity sliding open and shut Pain thinks of history

without darkness and digs without darkness or soil
without garbage or marrow Pain digs without thinking

of digging and the hand and the wrist without history
and the bracelet child size Pain slides up its arm.

PAIN THINKS OF THE LAST THING

its eyes inflamed with the body's late hour its heart enlarged
with x-ray & dye it listens it watches the sitcom news
the award

winning documentation of war without notice of birth &
death without

history month without century's end Pain thinks of the
last thing

lying in bed sitting up in the chair & breathing the last
of the room

worn thin as the lung without oxygen hydrogen filling
the air Pain

thinks of the last thing pouring water the daily milk
over stones

the pleasure of stillness broken the last thing without
teeth without

mineral or vertebrae's raiment without Pain's identical cells

ICELANDIC POPPIES

All summer, the poppies held sway in my kitchen garden,
magisterial and tall, a smear of melon.

They were rare gods I tamed, their four tongues
spread wide, each tongue stroked with a brush of violet.
They were so fragile that they would shake in my hands.

My friend came to visit with his black hair dyed yellow.
He was bronze and wrapped in an orange beach towel,
his lover David in dark blue. They were flowers, too,
and I adored their adorations of each other, how
they leaned, kissed pool-side as if magnetized by the sun.

Now, one by one, in the shallow rains of late September,
the poppies close. Eventually, they will shatter.
I find their scraps, still fresh, caught on their own gray-green
leaves or brutalized, pressed by rain into the mud.
It is like finding on the footpath, the body of a tanager

or the bruised peel of nectarine. After the dross of beauty,
what? Seed-heads, frost-blue and shaped like
Byzantine cupolas are rising above the curling, mothy leaves.
The holy kingdom sways in the wind as the petals did.
Its domes are bald and blind, and capped with green stars.

My friends who were in love have gone back
to their separate cities. They say the summer was an illusion,
due to the narcotic of lust. But wait, I call after them,
to have been *drowsed with the fume of poppies!*
To have been rapt! Induced! To have been red chiffon!

REDPOLLS

For days they have swarmed the thistle bag
like flies to a sweet.
The snow began early and broadened.
They lifted in two flocks from the side of the alder,
circled the slough of willows
as if they would be coming back, then further out,
toward the circumference, and they were gone.
I was there when the hundred red polls decided
to leave my life, scarlet tag
on their foreheads, pink wash on their breasts.
Tundra birds, the book said. Circumpolar.
The winds now are distant. I dare not look up,
my feet filthy with ash and the too-early night,
my back-seat with food wrappers, bags of laundry.
No wonder I want to buy something new:
red hair, or a lipstick in a shade called poppy,
an orchid strap that peeks out from under my clothes.
The way I like to hear myself talk when
I've had wine and am well-read, the way I don't
believe in mountain lions unless I've seen them—
this winter, the light never touching the walls,
what is it that I was supposed to learn?
Day drizzles through, marsh-pit and alabaster.
The slur, that's what I can't stand, from moment
to moment, yet, this morning, I saw the red polls
leave for good. An interruptive species,
the books says, which means they won't be back
next year or next, like my grandmother, for instance.
So, after work, I make popcorn, fill her green bowl,
take it out to the creek where she might find it.
I love it here, too, though the great things I want:
to speak with the dead, to unfurl my neurosis
in some kind of exhaustive wind,
to become disciplined and productive, elude me.
I read of Artaud who was tortured by his own mind,
how he felt his own mind wasn't his.
We all seem to live in approximation to our lives,

surrounded by a bevy of ghosts who,
stripped of their voices, mime and wave us to some
seat of origin. A swarm, a foreign country,
they approach and fade and finally, don't you think,
they give up on us? Not like the chickadees
who will come to my hand,
who blacken the snow beneath them with husks.

Lynne Knight

Two Poems

AS IF LOVE WERE A ROOM

That day things began to seem a little loose
about the edges, dirt crumbling so her spade
kept slicing at the roots of penstemon and lavender
below the garden wall, words blurring till the thing
he said kept replicating like a wayward cell,

making the sky tear open, edges yielding edges,
the long night pulling the moon out of phase
till moonlight spilled like cloth inside the window
while wind blew over her as she lay curled
on the bed, trying to erase the sense of edges

cutting into her like all his quick-flung, parting words—
I just can't be here anymore—as if love were
a room, broken up by door and window, skylight—
exits all around while she was left there coiled
on the bed, a snake or rope, something

that could loosen at the edges, though for longer
than she could have dreamed—days, weeks,
the moon in many guises—rigidity set in and nothing
gave. Then one day she stood and stretched her body
to its edges, smiled that they held her in like walls.

WINTER FLOWERS

She set the bulbs to root in glass vases
on the window sill. Narcissi, amaryllis.
Within days, the pale green tusks
of root would start. By the time
the field was deep with snow,
they'd be in bloom. She had to keep

life going. The doctors said she might
not outlive Spring. It was the worst kind
of cancer. Every morning she recited
the list of things she'd never do
until the words seemed common
as the names of common flowers.

She'd stand sipping tea, staring
into the bulbs: *House in Ireland*.
Child. Book. One morning
she noticed the papery lids
had peeled back until the bulbs
seemed eyes—the backs of eyes,

rooting down with the codes
things are given to live by.
She stirred them in the water.
Let it be a blind going like that.
Let the last breaths drift to the surface
calm as long-rooted flowers.

Dennis Hinrichsen

AT THIS MOMENT AND AT THIS MOMENT AND AT THIS

moment—a pink-gold light
rages at the edge of visible matter,
time spilling

in rods and segments of arcs, curved
as the snow-covered fields
are curved, unmarked

to the edge of infinity. I watch it all
behind
the pitched blade of a windshield,

whatever particles I've inhaled
and pushed back out—
Christ's tears, ash from a fire—now

oily, smeared: the x-ray of my breathing.
How like ice
it spikes up to improve its view,

grows six ways at once. All along
the hammered
landscape: ice whiskers and ice teeth.

The trees, too, sheathed in aluminum.
The river
purling in its liquid metal heart.

Each possible union of two things
including now
the deer I saw at dusk,

freshly dying—on its side like a horse,
its body rounded
like a horse—so that I thought it another

creature at first in my swerve
 around it;
 and this worker, days later,

I saw twisting on the roadside; she, too, freshly
 hit, freshly
 dying, one leg and part

of her back pinned to the planet,
 the other
 writhing because something in it had

fractured, her nerves stinging as if touched
 by a wire...
 I say this now because it matters: her

overalls were *rounded, tawny*. Someone
 else was out of a car,
 screaming across the freeway

at a man on a ladder, who looked away
 at first,
 and then, with extreme caution, released his hands

from a long parabola of voltage. Sunlight
 was every-
 where, and a few clouds. A jet,

high up, dropped away from us
 like a needle
 into a shallow bowl

of milk... *Drink*, the gods
 instruct us—*at this*
 moment—that moment—and in each narrow run of time—

Molly Tenenbaum Two Poems

CHOPSTICKS ARE DIFFICULT TO MANAGE
WITH SLIPPERY FINGERS

You've read the menu, pages of soy-stained sheets.
Now say the fortune, adding "between the sheets."

Your talent is not quickly known. Be watchful.
You will soon receive new clothes — between the sheets.

Grit glues feet, dandruff settles, dusts mites dig in —
How did they get so stagnantly green, the sheets?

I can't say what I mean, I don't even know,
Love, I give up. I say, Guillotine the sheets.

The ancestors on the ships, before they could
Hang curtains, first had to quarantine the sheets.

I knew a painter so obsessed with filling
Up surfaces she even silkscreened the sheets.

Laved in lavender, sprinkled with dew, etched with
Crinkled summer sun, how damascene, the sheets.

You this, me that, ooh, aaah hooting and swinging —
How retro, how droll, how pleistocene, the sheets.

In our house we never toothbrushed corners, boiled
The phone, ironed underwear, or preened the sheets.

Secretly I love the smell, warm and close, of,
After burrito dinner, bean in the sheets.

She's stacking cans, scraping lettuce-mold, while her
True name, her lips, lush breasts, careen in the sheets.

TALE BY COLOR

When two born in opposite towns
from birth have the same color hair

and he walks on a sidewalk past
a newsstand, coffee shop, Mexican knick-knack store
tan pants the same tan as his hair

while she walks — knick-knacks, coffee, news — same street
same time white dress
the same white as the sun spraying both their gold hair

the gold with a little spring in it
leaves creased pastel in the tree

gold with a little red in it
eyes in a camera-flash

gold with a little blue in it
window-trim of the house across the street
she remembers from childhood,
lizard-bellies he stroked to sleep behind the third-grade classroom
waking them up by turning them over

with a wife already in it
pepper and salt, her fingers translucent as fish-bones

and children whose world is the color of sandwiches
green for lettuce pink for salami
allowed to dip their knives in the mustard

an oval of hurt in it
blue, ocean blue as the shadow that moves through a wave
when a whale rides far under

gold with a little white in it
cave-white of morning glory roots they pull after years
together in the yard after work, rubber string through the soil

while with a little gold in it
of beach sand their wet footprints slap

with a little dim in it
closet-dark soaking the pant-legs
splashing a shawl on the shoulders of the white dress

gold and black like old pages
inside an embossed leather book,
title flaking, the rubbed leaf and silverfish
trailing off bright at the edges

Ronald Wallace

SUSTENANCE

Australia. Phillip Island. The Tasman Sea.
Dusk. The craggy coastline at low tide in fog.
Two thousand tourists milling in the stands
as one by one, and then in groups, the fairy penguins
mass up on the sand like so much sea wrack and
debris. And then, as on command, the improbable
parade begins: All day they've been out fishing
for their chicks, and now, somehow, they find them
squawking in their burrows in the dunes, one by one,
two by two, such comical solemnity, as wobbling by
they catch our eager eyes until we're squawking, too,
in English, French, and Japanese, Yiddish and Swahili,
like some happy wedding party brought to tears
by whatever in the ceremony repairs the rifts
between us. The rain stops. The fog lifts. Stars.
And we go home, less hungry, satisfied, to friends
and family, regurgitating all we've heard and seen.

TEETERING OF YOUR OWN FREE WILL

1

Yes, you remember on the playground
a plank supported in the middle, waist high,
on which you and your other could ride,
send yourselves flying and dipping.

2

Remember sliding forward
to balance the weight of a younger.

Pushing off on exuberant feet
and catching your fall with knowing knees,

or not,
jolting your rival as you bump the ground,

then tilting backward
to hold him suspended,

each of you natively endowed
with considerable physics and psychology.

3

Remember, alone there on a restless afternoon,
edging up the inclining half,
over the fulcrum,
and down the plunging side.

Or poising,
halted just over the balance point,
board leveled on the delicate air,
teetering of your own free will
between equal and opposite reactions,

receptor of an abundant philosophy.

AND NO SLALOM

Perhaps it did not happen at all
that Thomas Eakins,
as more than one lady, however, remembered,
skated there in the light of the moon —
or, as one recalled, of a bonfire
on the bank of the river.
Perhaps, Philadelphian,
lawful depicter of sisters,
of oarsmen and illustrious citizens,
he did no swizzle, no crossover
there, snow sifting from the birches,
no mohawk,
no backward outside swingroll,

no dancing with the shadows,
with his reasons,
no effrontries
of the night air,
deft vanishing
discernments of his blades,
infinite symmetries,
dire earnest ingenuities,
defiant frenzies of pure likelihood.

ALMOST CERTAINLY SOMETHING METAPHYSICAL
IS GOING ON

Across the map in the brain of a swallow
spring moves at sixteen miles a day.

A squall is blowing up across the bay.

The blood of a woodchuck drains out on the leaves.

•

Along the highway into the foothills
a man stands beside a stack of his belongings.

A rowboat rests in the grass.

Above the trembling poplars a kite dips and swirls.

Leonard Gontarek

BLOSSOMS

I pointed out the light, to my son,
the way it lay on the branches,
off-color of peach, this morning
in the sumac. He did take
a moment to look, but
he is two, he probably thinks
I'm a crazy man in a bathrobe.
He just wants juice.
Driven men wired with
explosives are placing themselves
near children and women leading
simple, civil lives.
Flashes and blossoms of
smoke rise from the map,
and we are watching cartoons
with the sound down and
classical music in the background.
As Bugs Bunny does
some fast talking, I return
to last night. My dead mother
pointing to some place in the room,
asking, "Whose fault is this?"
I drifted in and out of sleep,
as I do now. I wish I knew
what she meant. There has been
so much death close to us, recently.
Death inching down the trunk of
the tree like shadows dropping
in the grass, while the first
shoots are forced into the air
which is crisp, poisonous, unnaturally
blue, and may be, by some accounts, a dream.

David Roderick

KITCHEN DUTY

I thank forks. I thank the spoons
thick with sauce, the butter dish,
the columns of pepper and salt.
I thank the pots in their strife
on the countertop, and I look upon
all of the recyclables for the curb:
aluminum foil, cans of rank broth,
a bottle swilled with the floating
shells of flies. Six mouths we fed.
Six mouths filled the ash trays.
I bless tumblers and an urn, a cup
of spoiled cream. I admire the mess
without lifting my hands to its need.
I praise all the trinkets that save us
from spillage and rot. Twisties. Clips.
And the tools of measuring I bless:
numb thermometer, flush stack of cups.
Tiny shadows come for the remains:
snips of green at the chopping board
where the scraps and seeds are piled.
For a while there seems to be no time
so I thank the platter of cold meat
and the winged one lucky enough
to find it, a housefly graced by a god.
I do not flinch. I let it judge where
to land. I let it lust from plate to place,
this heedless visitor to pie crusts.

Bob Brooks

WOOF AND WARP

A man said to his carpet, lie down. I am, said the carpet.

Well done, said the man. Now, tell me your secret. What
secret is that? said the carpet, blanching.

Your secret deviation, said the man. Your hidden flaw, your
all but imperceptible anomaly. You know what I mean. Truly I
do not, said the carpet. blushing.

Let me put it this way, said the man: I am a god. Only gods
are perfect. If you claim to be without imperfection I shall
be very angry. Not I! said the carpet, mottling. Queer
figures took shape all over it—rosettes, vines, salamanders.

The man smiled and said, I am waiting.

I confess, said the carpet. You have seen right through me.
It is just as the woman who wove me told me: a god cannot be
fooled. So why weave what looks like an error on purpose?
What arrogance, what deceitfulness! And so she did not. Which
is in fact my secret, and my deviation—I alone among carpets
carry no hidden flaw. As, being a god, of course you knew,
and tested me; and brought me low. Thus do I make myself
prostrate in your presence.

Well done, said the man. Now for your next test: roll over.

Ross Whitney

THIS WILD RED BIRD

This wild red bird I'm trying to feed
is perched, precarious,
on a spring-green tip of the lowest branch
of a Douglas fir at the farthest reach
of my arm and my yard
and a cul-de-sac I know
as my own, a bird I'm sure

is younger than my daughter was
when I realized she had tipped
balance from girlhood to womanhood
in height, hips, breasts,
and a winged readiness that seemed to be
leaving me more than approaching me, wary
of my words, my lightest gaze,

my slightest or steadiest encouragement,
my extended hand
piled so high with grains of love
that any more might spill
from my palm to be gathered later
by another wild creature
also emboldened by hunger.

Melissa Peters

Two Poems

A VIEW FROM HURRICANE RIDGE

Up here, I am not a girl.
I am so close to the sun, with my hand
to the light, I can see through a labyrinth
of bone. I don't believe in this body,
its elaborate cage. And unbound,

my hands reach to loosen flames, the sun's
torrent down my arms, all blonde filament
catching fire, the wind, everything
catching in my nylon jacket, enclosing me
in a restless orb, an incandescent shell.

I have pulled my hand free
from my mother's hold
and climbed with skidding footsteps
and unsure fingers to the top of this ledge.
Everything is within reach.

When I open my arms, they are tree-veined,
long as the mountains' shadows.
I wave my fingertips down the mountainside,
darken the sky above our house
in its tiny, silver town.

My father stands on this mountain
and feels the pressure of rock, head to foot,
the subduction of earth's grinding plates.
My mother holds to this steep hillside,
its avalanche lily, her dreams fragile and secret.

I want to call to them,
my mother, my father, rooted to the earth
and its sadness: Look at me. I am not a girl.
I am white light, some insubstantial
flame.

I don't know what keeps me here,

poised on coiled ankles and pointed toes,
trying to climb my way
from the mountain's shoulders
to the head's pure fire

before glaciers reach me with grounding hands.

FIGURE EIGHTS

I know where it is at all times:
Mt. Hood is my compass star,

true north. I ride my horse hard,
his gallop reined in,

staccato, we work summer's
bleached stalks into a looping

path turning in on itself—
grass cut, green-juiced, blood

and rocks, a loose stone flung
from under hoof's horned bone.

Two circles that join, the fallen
figure eight of infinity: we divide

the lay of land, like a river
from its banks.

My mother tells me it's natural
to want to die when you're young:

life is impossible. My horse—
his razor-swift, black-honed legs—

is my needle, the magnetic
point where I swivel. He knows

all I want to know. We pivot,

twist and rage. No end, no beginning.

The last time I saw my father
he knew he was dying, but didn't say.

When I work these figure eights,
it's the only time I take aim:

my horse straddles the meridian
we've traced and re-traced;

I tighten his reins, steel bit bobs
between grinding teeth, and he collects

his gait, rocking slow-motion, imploding
until I want only this moment

when I nudge heel into left rib
and he lifts into air: absolute

stillness, the exact point where
two circles touch, the promise

of chaos—sky is down, ground
up, trees turning—before he lunges

full weight, into a flying change,
landing with a catapult of speed

and fury, leading now on the right,
inside leg of a new ring.

I've no eyes now, just an inward
looking, this discipline balancing

circles. There's no time for mothers
and fathers. I am more and more

this horse, with work to do
running down God.

BIRD LADY

He dreams her in color.
In the morning, he traces her thin ribs,
tells her how bright she was last night.
Brighter than an airplane, he says.
Brighter than a cloud in sunlight.
She smiles with listening.
She sings and pecks the distance.

At first he likes it, her voice beating
wings against his heart. But later,
he sleeps all afternoon. He is tired
as a mammal. She laughs, flapping
around the house.

Night is frantic. She hops
from foot to foot. She makes him
build her nests out of wire hangers
and towels. She makes him dance
for her until sunrise.

When she leaves,
He takes his shoes off
To sit on her eggs.
He watches the sky
until his eyes burn.

For weeks, nothing hatches.
In April, the shells give way.

In one, a postcard.
In another, a soup spoon.
The third, brimming with rain.

ORPHEUS

We passed on the stairs sometimes,
me going up, my arms circling a bulk of groceries,
you headed down, whistling, eyes lowered,

your instrument tucked in its black case under your arm.
I don't know if you would remember me.
Certainly not enough to immortalize me in song.

I used to listen to your music through the floor boards.
I would lie down in my kitchen,
my ear warming the tiles at the sound of your voice.

I realized you were gone near sunrise on a Sunday,
when I woke to the silence pounding the building.
I ran the water in every sink in the apartment.

That afternoon, I dropped a dish on the floor,
and bent to fit the pieces together again
like the verses of a song. That night, I tried to sing.

Now I collect your mail for you.
I have convinced the mailman
that I knew you well.

Once, a letter in a woman's handwriting.
A free package of strings from a music store.
Always the papers, piled up on your mat.

At night, the slightest noise wakes me.
Cats in the alley.
Tires hissing on wet asphalt.

Last night, two lovers fighting below my window.
"I don't even want to hear this anymore."
"Then don't. Turn around and go."

GREASE ROOM EPIPHANY

In the grease room's darkness
(somewhere above the stacks of retreads
and rings of stockpiled air filters

and rough pine planks that sag
under cans of every kind of paint
failing to approximate a rainbow,

where the top shelf's a stashing place
for his *Hustlers*, his *Playboys*,
his chew roll of Copenhagen)

a single valentine from the drugstore
is hidden, with not a smudge
of grease or dirt on it.

Would it be hyperbole
to say turpentine and thinner
perfume the air;

say the cobwebs
are like costume jewelry
accessorizing the beams and rafters;

their specks of dust, tiny rhinestones
after a night of mist
followed by hard frost?

Even the dead flies
and drops spilt out of oil drums
glitter in the weak and dirty light.

SWEETHEARTS

One Friday late at night they grope their way
through the pale statuary and fallen leaves

for a hollow to lie in where they fit perfectly
the way their perfect bodies fit one another.

It seems quite natural that he is the star
this season and she the head cheerleader.

Once or twice she recalls something else
unforgettable she wants to say but does not.

They touch as if to say, *Don't ever forget this*,
are young enough to wring love from elegy

with the vertigo of their longing, the rush
of uncovering and pushing flesh against flesh.

One tiny act is all it takes to bury themselves
in some small excuse for somewhere else,

anywhere but right here where his ambitions
will be planed down on the graveyard shift

and hers will be spent waiting on tables
with trays of coffee, hot cakes and syrup.

Gary Fincke

THE FEAR WORKSHOP

Write the man who can't manage a bridge. Have him believe he will suddenly swerve through the railing, tumble his car into the dark, distant water.

Write the woman who avoids tunnels. Let her drive twenty miles instead of two. Describe her search for a job in the states with the most level land.

Write the man who fears crossing streets. Watch him stop at every curb because he cannot cross alone. Now, stay immediate, but open this story: Make him follow the next crosser, close as a child. He expects to stumble. Fall under the wheels of a taxi or bus. He feels his heart explode in the crosswalk, his hands fluttering at his chest.

Write the man who can't live above the seventh floor. Be certain he knows exactly how fast he'll fall, floor by floor, when he pitches through every window. Give him access to the structural problems that start at the eighth floor. Elaborate. Complicate. Surprise. Let him learn the workings of elevators, the history of their disasters, the strain stairs put upon the heart. Forget the fear of high-rise fire. This man waits for low planes; he's thinking earthquakes, the density of rubble.

Write the woman who is afraid of bumps. Be specific. Have each jolt, by size, become a squirrel, a rabbit, a deer. Make her stop and search the woods for animals she's wounded. Listen to her confess she's hit a hiker on the highway. That she's checked under her car for the maimed. Before you submit this, walk outside and lay your hands to the asphalt. Know what it is

to kneel on a road, traffic passing, to look for bodies snared on an axle. Examine the landscape. Everything is a body: Bags, bushes, a bundle of misshapen wire. Use your fingertips, your lips, your tongue. Go ahead— Be deliberate. Last story. Make us believe it.

Paulann Petersen Two Poems

FOR THE LOVE OF SLEEP

Sleep, your pet, erotic toy,
curls its limbs around
your limbs, silkens
its fur and skin against
your easing breath,
then rolls onto its back.

Here you sink, you drift beside
its feral heat. Each rise
and fall of your chest is
caress. Each clasp, unclasp
of your heart is a stroke
lingered along the down
of that underbelly—
flushed with dream—
abandoned only to you.

TO DREAM A LOVER AWAY

Let your dream carry him
away, and by that very
dreaming, put him
at arm's length where you may
examine at leisure
his exact shadowy shape,
maybe even come to terms

with his voice, its narcotic
ways and by-the-ways.

How dream you, Sweetness?
you might ask of him
as you dream right past
his swift, disarming glance,
moving on to explore
those ample lips,
his oh so heavy eyelids
half lowered—seeing all this
with your decidedly
undreamy, dreaming eyes.

Take him all in. Take his own
sweet time. Keep in mind
this dreaming lets you
linger on what's bound to be
too close, too wide
for the focus of your
open eyes. So linger along.
Have your way with him,
your own easy-does-it take
on what's waiting in
the wild awake.

Catie Rosemurgy

Two Poems

GRACE LIES FROZEN IN THE FRONT YARD

She's stunned, made of colors,
and afraid to move anything
but her eyes. She has landed in the snow
like a tropical bird. She was going somewhere,
a camellia bush beside a lagoon,
a branch so new
she would seem to hover
in the air. But someone threw a switch. The humidity
shrank into ice, and she dropped,

frozen, mid-flight. Exactly
the way she'd planned it: her coat bright
and broken, her face a serious mistake
in a field of snow, his name
caught inside the cube forming
in her throat. Better her than him.
When the branches stopped
their kind, slow scratching
of the sky, she could tell

that somebody, sooner or later,
was going to freeze. She'd lose him
either to someone else's newest kiss
or to his own stillness. Lying next to him
would lead to waking up, and waking up would lead
to finding a lump in the bed.
Either dead or disinterested.
She hasn't decided yet if it's good or bad
that nothing lasts forever.

WHEN SHE GETS HOME FROM THE GROCERY STORE
AND NOTICES THE FIREFLIES, GRACE LIES DOWN
NEXT TO THE DRIVEWAY

The stars are loose between the houses.
The street of white, unchipped porches
would have her believe we do
get our sprinkling of outer space,
if we stay quiet long enough.

This is the overconfidence bred
by venetian blinds and by painted hooks
from which lobelia baskets are hung
every summer. This is the over-confidence
that gets her out of bed in the morning.

Burn by the back steps. Burn out by the car tire.
Never has apocalypse been as bright blue
or as easy to love and to tease.
Her thoughts of rubble never last long.
The doors across the street

always stand. She wishes she could doubt
the end of the world will be porch-lit,
a series of sparkles over her neighbor's pool.
The flashes of light reassure her.
The dark reassures her. The lesson of the firefly:

she can expect her smile to be temporary,
her will to be wing-sized.
But the overall effect is beautiful.
The lesson of the firefly:
the delight of large numbers, of losing

track of herself in a long string of zeros.
On 14th street, the repetition of acorns
and mailboxes is a radical observation.
She can shut up. Life will still stutter.
Her revolutionary wish

is for a fresh glass of ice cubes,
a full, chilly hand. All night she'll envy
the fireflies' ability to scatter.
They're lit and they linger
three feet above everyone's yard.

She would show up only at night. She would get less done.
She would see herself repeated
between all the marigolds. Tonight, an aerial view of the town
after everyone has turned on their floodlights
is the only way to describe her mood.

John Bargowski Three Poems

TWO DWARF BUDDHAS AND A STATUE OF ST. JUDE

Nothing middle of the line
for her she warned
as she rubbed her hands
over the champagne
metallic finish of a reduced price
Mother Model.
After all, she's saved
enough for the best.
Triple lacquered high gloss
mahogany would be nice,
imported and deep grained.
Definitely the polished brass
handles and the praying hands,
maybe a model she could customize
with gold leafing
and a mother-of-pearl inlay —
That isn't out of the question,
is it?

She wants to know if she can
choose any pillow, upgrade

the multi-stitched embroidered panels,
if they have anything
with a little more lace,
and do they know she's taking
everything with her —
her eyes, her one kidney,
her quadruple bypass
and two stainless steel stents,
though she's thought twice
about her diamond wedding ring,
and the two dwarf buddhas
and statue of St. Jude
she dusted for three years
on Sip Avenue,
which brings her to the high cost
of nursing home care,
Kervorkian and his machines,
and how I'll know
when it's time for me
to pull the plug.

NUMBERS

She reminds me where
she's hidden the roll
of silver dollars, and not
to forget to play
her *Pick 6* numbers on Monday
and Thursday, asks me again
to recite the birthdates
of her father's older brothers
and the street-address of her first
house on Newark Avenue.
To please her I nod my head,
jot down the numbers
before the cardiac unit
nurse enters the room and slides
into the green vinyl chair.

Twenty-five, maybe thirty,
in white uniform dress
she leans forward, touches
her own breast, begins *Here*
the internal mammary
artery is resected
from the inner chest
wall ...

I keep
my head down and listen
to the ventilator
rattle.

A surgical shave,
full body, neck to thigh ...
The nurse's finger reaches
for her ankle tracing
the saphenous vein moving
slowly up her white hose,
near the knee her nail catches.
There is a small sound like silk
ripping and for a second
her hand slips under the hem
of her skirt.

Before I leave
my mother insists
I take a five for the gas,
then squeezes my wrist,
Play the room number,
play 4-4-6.

JERSEY CITY HEIGHTS IN THE LATE 40'S

She's sure Nixon will be there,
Mitch Miller with his rolling lyrics
and bouncing ball, her mother
back together with the father
who had abandoned them, probably
in his trademark spats
and black fedora, the good friend
lost under the surgeon's knife
and the brother to Rahway State—
both there. She expects her husband
to meet her at the gate, shaved
and in his best blue suit,
with the *Pontiac* warmed up
ready to show her around,
not streets of gold
but streets lined with brownstones
and sapling Norway maples,
something like Jersey City
in the late 40's, the war over,
safe, clean, affordable housing
available. She'll want *Illvento's* pizza
and a couple sips
of her husband's *Ballantine*,
show him her reconstructed heart,
laugh about the one bad kidney
and stainless steel stent,
now useless and left behind.
No more cold feet and tingling
in the hands, and though she can't
really say if there will be anything
like the clearance racks
at *Cara Carson's* or the frosted marble
cake from the *5 Corners Jewish Bakery*,
she's counting on
some of the better chocolates,
sees herself in four
spotless rooms on the first floor,
somewhere on one of the smaller blocks

off the Boulevard or near Journal Square—
where the Almighty
will reside to watch over the joy
of his image and likeness—
no stubborn cockroaches or dust settling
daily on the credenza, a stoop
to sit out on for the warm nights,
every saint's face passing by
that of another good neighbor
she knows from the Heights.

Lynne Kuderko

AT A FARMHOUSE BASHO STOPS TO ASK DIRECTIONS

The farmer begins by gesturing which path to take,
at which stone in the road to turn,
at which tree new leafed this spring.

One, two, three trees he counts, his arm
making circles in the air, like the ones made
by horses in the field, their tails

brushing away flies.

THE MAN HAS A HEART LIKE A KITE,

and he knows it, knows it's a bad idea.
For one thing, the wind keeps pushing him around,
wheeling him in spirals,
lifting him halfway to Venus,

then watching him drop.
He's sick of crash landings, fed up
with hanging upside down in trees—
a mouth full of feathers and twigs in his nose.

But don't ask what I think; I'm the same way.
I won't advise him to grab more gravity,
won't offer him bowls of stone soup;
what good is a kite in the garage?

Suppose he breaks his neck next time, so what;
no one's impressed by caution,
or sprawls on the couch, reading books about it.
Or goes to the park with a rock on the end of a string.

SHE'S LIKE THE SKY. THAT ENDLESSLY BEAUTIFUL

Here's the simple difference between hurricanes and storms,
earthquakes and aftershocks, tsunamis and waves: scale.

"Yeah? Well so what," you say. "It's apples and oranges.
Or oranges and grapefruit. Or anyway, grapefruit and grapes."

Not quite—I can throw rocks at your head,
or God can throw an asteroid. What do you pick?

I'm talking about jumping in versus swan dives,
sonic booms and whispers,

sparking versus inferno,
I'm talking about degree... .

"Is she pretty?" As a swan dive.
"Sexy?" Earthquakes *and* aftershocks.

"But is she smart? Is she funny?" Hurricane. Tsunami.
"And does she make you happy?" Like asteroids and grapes.

FLY AWAY

Our daughter finds a glut of ladybugs woven
 under a bull pine, a needly thatch. She's seven
 and as she moves our way we halfway think
 it's blood her hands and wrists are red from,
 drops falling all along from there
 to where we wait, rapt but not yet panicked.
 It's the look on her face that contains us—
 something like joy and a full-blown bodily fascination:
 her small hands a bowl of red-backed bugs,
 streams of them crawling by now
 beyond her elbows and biceps,
 to her shoulders and neck,
 and one rides the lobe of her left ear
 like a leggy, domesticated ruby.

"No!" she says, as we start to brush them off:
 she likes the feel of it, like a girl shrub,
 a vine of skin and bone in the sun.
 A pair on her eyelid makes her squint,
 and when the lone earwalker winds down a whorl
 toward the waxen dark, she shakes her head like a filly,
 flings the stayed-home fistfuls left
 in her hands across our faces, and laughs
 when I spit one back. Dampened and dull,
 it's lit on her lip. She licks it off
 and stands there glistening, black-eyed blood beauties
 head to waist, then peels the spat one off her tongue
 with her teeth, puckers, and blows a kiss, that misses—
 across the meadow, into the odd new light, toward home.

PLAGUE AND FEAST

The horn worm loves tobacco and tomato,
 sympathetic predilections, I think,
 but of the latter, which is all I have—Early Girls,
 Beef Steaks, and bottom-heavy Romas—it prefers
 the tenderest, most camphorous leaves,
 so that the tops of my four vines, stump
 by greeny stump, looked shorn that morning last week,
 as though sprung dying from pages of Exodus.

And in truth I had never seen so many—a horde?
 a herd? by what collective label might so many as these
 be known if not a plague? Then six, then twelve,
 then thirty, finger thick, too green and clicking in a bucket.
 My right hand was war-painted with their mouthings.
 That they are the larvae of hawk moths is a sad
 misnomer, nothing predatory or taloned about them winged,
 suckers rather of nectar from the late summer flowers.

But I too love tobacco and tomato and that morning
 thought of those two words, pausing a second,
 my man's prehensile paw stained ceremonially green,
 and could not recall whether what I wondered about
 were *etymology* or *ent-* and stood in the perfect sun
 sucking in the liniment of air, the pure, clear smoke of tomato,
 then turned and picked up the bucket
 and walked with purpose to the chicken yard.

Soon thereafter the hens were upon them like vengeance,
 thirty-four succulent, slow-moving, leaf-tinted filets
 pecked and choked back until the chickens' gullets bulged ripe.
 I might, I think, have enjoyed the spectacle too much,
 a blood-deep fascination with food-chain dynamics.
 Sluggish locusts and faithful layers, the vines in the garden
 unfurling now into many new leaves, and this morning, at breakfast,
 tomatoes and the greening yokes, an omelet, toothsome, in puce.

About Our Contributors

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WE NEED YOUR HELP

Poetry Northwest is in its forty-first 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

