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Poetry

NORTHWEST



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POETRY NORTHWEST AUTUMN 1975 VOLUME XVI, NUMBER 3

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POETRY NORTHWEST

AUTUMN 1975

Judith Small

Five Poems

DEXTER PEOPLE

"What do you want to photograph
Dexter for? It ain't
nothin' but an old mud hole."
—A Dexter woman

The poems are based, loosely, on photographs taken by Selina Roberts in Dexter, an unincorporated community in western Oregon. Quotes are from conversations with the people pictured, which Ms. Roberts used as captions.

AN OLD WOMAN

The fur, the warm weight, the loud
breaths of his big cat suddenly
smug in her lap.

The kitchen clock
ticking like pinpricks

I've worked all my life.

After a while the refrigerator
stirs itself awake, a cold wind
blowing through the
bones of old vegetables.

*There's no reason now that I'm
blind that I should
do a thing, but my husband
still says I'm lazy.*

A woman who has
lived in kitchens, diced
her thoughts fine, spooned them
into sterilized jars
to float till she has time.
After a while the refrigerator
is quiet, the cat asleep.

*He cares more about that cat than he
does about me.*

Now her thoughts
fill the kitchen like smells,
the sting of pickles, the blood-smell
of beets, potatoes
roasting like earth in their skins.

When the door bangs, the cat
jumps down, the old man
comes home,
she will stay in her chair with her eyes
empty, her mind clear as a jar.

AN OLD MAN

"When I was young Buffalo Bill
himself patted me on the head
and told me I was a fine boy.
Now what do you think of that?"

1

Suspenders hold him straight
as the rake he holds, but he
smiles under his spectacles.
The stripes on his shirt are
furrows in a field ploughed
carefully, year after year.

Behind, in the orchard, wind
lifts like skirts
the leaves of cherry trees.

2

Buffalo Bill walks the orchard at dusk, pulling down
cherries, sucking the pulp off,
spitting the pits hard on the ground.
When the moon comes out like a medal Bill
remembers his white stallion, gleaming
in the sun, the shouts
blazing out from the grandstands as he
rode around and around the ring, and after the show

the children led to him, shy, polished
like coins to pile on his lap.

3

Now what do you think of that?

The old man remembers the Wild West
Show, how his father pushed him

fast to the front of the crowd, how he
turned his face like a sunflower

up to the scout, and his skin felt
flushed and soft as a fruit under

hard palms, and the trigger finger
stroking his cheek.

TOOTY BUG WAGLEY

"The poor have no children, just small people."
—Ai

You give away
nothing for free, Tooty Bug, no
fireflies, no hugs, no
lemonade warm in a paper cup.

You live behind
dirt like armor, covering
cheeks, elbows, nose, and the dirtiest
part of you is
two fists crunched
against one eye like a patch.

Defend your dirt like turf, beware
the children living in playpens—

throw your
name like a mortar, Tooty Bug, into
the white houses of the fathers.

AN OLD COUPLE

"Come over
in the morning. In the afternoon . . .
well, things are not that good by then."

It starts out slow.

In the pot on the stove the big spoon
stuck there since morning
drops into the beans.
The beans turn the color of rust.
You're at the gray end of a
roll of paper towels when the
kettle boils over, with shrieks.

Where is the wife?
She is buttoning a sweater around
sagging breasts, or setting
bobby pins in crinkled
rows across her head.
It doesn't matter. Love
is a weed, surviving.
Please come, you say.

You stand in the kitchen with your
hands in your pockets, your trousers

crumpled like paper bags,
You notice there's a knob
missing on the stove—that's
something you should fix tomorrow
morning. Right now,

papers bulge from a
drawer left open,
and the water in the dog's dish has
spilled on the linoleum,
and outside the light is already
thinking about skipping town,

and quietly your wife comes
into the kitchen in slippers,
and crossing the floor you take
her hand, like a letter.

A YOUNG WOMAN

"My husband works in town, and so
I have to take care of the livestock.
It's a lot of work and I don't
like to do it, but
someone has to."

Her eyes see farther than arrows, into
the walnut wrinkled in its shell, or the
skin of kernels white under corn husks.
She can see through the bodice of the neighbor's slip
to nipples pink as conch, she knows
through the pouch of her husband's underwear
the penis nestled like a small bird.

Somebody has to take care of the livestock,
someone has to work in town.
We live like logs, she thinks,
or stones, sinking into dirt,
while underneath, in the shadows, hundreds of
insects tend their small fires.

THE WHEREABOUTS

Whenever he found himself there, whenever he was at large and his whereabouts unknown, with someone trying to find him—say, the wife or the man from the credit-card company or the cops—though he never did anything and was never the kind of person that did—whenever, in short, he was ever wanted to make an appearance or come into view for whatever reason, he was never there, not ever in one place where you could find him. In case you expected to notice the note he left on the dinette in the breakfast nook on his way out through the breezeway, look again. There isn't even a warm place where he sat with his forehead into his arms or the ring where the shotglass was from which he steeled himself against his departure or so much as one whiff of his cigarette or his after-shave, because he didn't drink and he never smoked and he thought men's fragrances were unmanly. As for him crouched over with forehead in arms, come now, he was hardly that type of person. Whenever he found himself off to himself, the question of where he was didn't matter—no matter whether others were overwrought, or however many, from some blind concern, pursued him, blindly, into his whereabouts. Wherever he was, whenever he was there, it wasn't special, what he did, believe me. All he had to do was make his face go blank, imagine his eyes and nose and mouth away, until the whole front of whatever he showed was a snowfield over which a snow-filled sky leaned like a great blank lady down from heaven for whom he had been waiting week after week since the last time he remembered where he was.

A MAN OF PARTS

Later this afternoon they are coming to take the rest away. It is almost autumn leaving me no more choice but to go on effortlessly, though in somewhat better humor than last week when they came for the French horn and the week before that the Louis Quinze settee along with the cuckoo-clock collection. I began in Basel that miserable autumn after Mother was shipped home in a crate leaving me nothing that I could do. One o'clock: I remember writing them a letter and mailing it from Milano before I left for Brindisi in the rain—no sign yet of when they will be here—only to let them know they shouldn't expect me home for some time on account of the rainy season. One o'clock: indolence I despise both in myself and others. Then off across the Adriatic, pausing at Corfu in that blue harbor, blue beneath bluer hills, thinking about those hills, thinking to disembark and disappear. How long has it been since that? Dolphins diving by, rough water between Naxos and Paros, bottles jostling behind the bar, though we were warm beside each other while our whiskies slid back and forth on the table and the barman sulked with everyone else asleep. Persistent images like these I think of this afternoon while they are on their way, to take away the rest of the whole damned business if they want it one last time. One o'clock: how do you like such indolent bemusement in a man of parts breathing alone in a forsaken place? I can scarcely remember what your face looked like, the two of us pitching over the sea like a pair of schoolboys huddled against the chill. I often dream you are walking towards me

and I can't make out your face. After they took her,
week after week, even with you, I dreamed
she had been sailing in her crate to look for me
but I was always gone. Even with you,
she kept on sailing. As soon as they have finished
they will send you this. Maybe the autumn
will come along sooner then. The rainy season.

Harold Witt

Two Poems

THE BLOOM

A green sterility—
so the sharp blades seemed—
some kind of thornless cactus
moved from house to house
and room to room
for years—maybe sixteen—

then sending up a shoot,
a slim stalk overnight,
suddenly prolific
as if it had the right
to try to be a garden
and put on blossom shows—

but in its starker way,
along its singleness
disclosing to our eyes
a delicate riches
of slender bells that opened
to show what cactus does

not very often, maybe—
rare as words of love—
if human, almost shyly,
as plant, the one that has
in endless desert stretches
moments of the rose.

IN A SUNSLANT

this October morning—
the distant lighted poplars yellow edged—
looking lower I noticed my old Bible
webbed in a dusty corner of my desk.
Some busy spider had worked over Cain and Abel,
Noah, Esau, Jacob and the rest,
and made a delicate trap of David's fable.

The Red Sea parted, Ruth stood in the corn,
Selah, Selah, the Psalms cryptically cried—
but where the antique binding had been torn
that realistic spider, shining eyed,
had sewn and sewn a pattern not to adorn—
only the invariable threadwork of its kind—
and laid the future waiting to be born.

Star over stable, waterwalk, fishers of men,
myths, truths, history, all were tied
word after word neatly in that net—
the cross went up as had been prophesied,
and Revelation warned of worse times yet—
but on my desk, in slant October light,
the clever spider never heard of it.

REALITY

The streets are full of people moving
in thickets of snowfall—animated marionettes,
the reel of a silent flick strewn with dead white
moths. Their voices are drowned out by the tinkling
of an ancient piano in the pit, played by an old man
with numb fingers. Overhead, hidden by the tight mesh,
the tinkling of tinsel, thin icicles breaking.

My eyes reach out
but cannot touch. It is like
trying to feel with frozen fingers,
it is like touching numbness.
The reality of things is hidden
behind a spiderweb
that gives but will not yield.
There are no entrances, no exists.
The outside world will forever remain
just that. Everyone, everything is
saying, *Noli me tangere*.

My eyes remember
the forgetting of sight.
They remember the melting
of contours, the fading away
of colors. My eyes have memories
of losses. My eyes are forgetting
to remember.

It is like speech going
into silence—into
muteness. It is a deafening
of eyes, it is like a candle's
burning past its wick, it is
like impotence, as one lies
beside the beloved.

Intolerables
are like a succession of stairs:
one intolerable
always leading to another.

I dreamed I picked up
a blind man's white cane
by mistake, then could not
find the place
to return it.

Stephen Dunn

Three Poems

COMING HOME, GARDEN STATE PARKWAY

Tonight the toll booth men are
congratulating the weather,
wishing me well. I'm all thank you's
and confusion, I don't know what

kind of conspiracy this is.
Then at Howard Johnson's
the pretty cashier apologizes
for the price of coffee. She wants me

to drive carefully, to think of her
on the dark, straight road.
Does she say these things to everyone?
I've done nothing

different, and in the mirror
there's the same old face
not even lovers have called handsome,
the same mouth that belies

absolute conviction.
I'm alone, and maybe
there's an underworld of those alone
and maybe tonight I've entered it—

the instant, safe intimacy
guaranteed to move on.
On the car radio
comes a noisy current song

and then an old, melodic lie
about love.
Afterwards, the disc jockey
speaks to all of us on the road,

he wants us to understand
the danger of the other man,
watch out, he says, for the blind side.
I'm going 70, the winter outside

is without snow, it's hard anymore
to be sure about anything.
Next toll station, I feel for a quarter—
the exact change

but I swerve
(as I knew I would)
to the woman holding out her hand.
She neither smiles nor speaks,

I try to believe
she's shy.
I'd like to put my hand in her hand,
to keep alive

this strange human streak I'm on.
But there's only money between us,
silver and flesh
meeting in a familiar goodbye.

LET'S SAY

Let's say the dark, one night,
is no metaphor for the dark
and men in sharkskin suits are
real men and all their women
real women dressed to kill.
Let's say your small car is
parked in the unmetaphorical dark
and you're aware of characters
who suddenly distinguish themselves
from lampposts and you're afraid,
but let's say you can confront your fear
as a sleepwalker confronts stairs—
with an ignorance
that has taken years of practice.

Let's say, then, you make it to your car
choosing to believe
that the switchblade which might have opened
a second ago
was the man in the sharkskin suit
clicking his tongue
against the roof of his mouth.
And the hand that reached from the back seat
to cover your mouth
was nothing but a flash
from a movie you saw last week.
Let's say you believe all this
because you're in your car now
and none of your blood is
making roses on the floor
and your headlights have come on
in this real dark
and you can see where you're going.

Let's say you have learned
to survive is just part of what it means
to be alive,

what do you do next
on the terrifying streets?

THE DANCE

When his legs were taken
from him, his neck

broke. The hangman said:
lobotomies

are worse;
at least in a hanging

you don't change
a man's personality.

We all agreed
he had a point.

But the dead man's tongue
was blue and out

over his lips. It's the look
of a man who has danced

with the State,
we said. It's lucky

he can't see himself!
I've saved him

some embarrassment then,
said the hangman,

and stared at us
and stared at us

until we broke
into an old soft shoe.

Edgar Prescott

LAZY LORNY WILL GET YOU!

Grandmother's face was stern.
I chopped a little faster
hacking the stubborn weeds.
Hidden in air
you tiptoed after me.
I feared you then.

But soon your voice
came easy on the wind
singing the cries of birds.
I felt your magic
in the gradual grass.

Tonight fat clouds
tumble across the moon
filling with amber light.
They stretch and change
forming two shaggy legs
a laughing goat-horned face.

You've got me friend.

EASTER MORNING

Sitting beside the altar in a flaming cassock,
hair slicked, chubby chin,
son of the Standard Oil agent,

who lost the ball in the Scared Heart game
and forgot his seat after Communion,
he in front of all

tried to hold still through the choppy sermon,
while outside the crocuses came up,
poison ivy in the woods,

and in the book Jesus.
Does anything stay down?
He paled and paled, and then—

Chocolate rabbits loose on the altar!
The priest kept muttering the old Resurrection.
His mother lost her faith.

His father dropped the long-handled money basket.
His class, his sex, the nuns—disgraced.
Everyone with a letter of his name in their name

or hair the color of his hair
put hands over face.
But he, genuflecting to leave,

wiping his mouth with a red sleeve,
felt all right at last,
and his real clothes were still dry.

TO MY STUDENT GONE TO ISRAEL

"None but a mule denies his family."
—Arab proverb

And now you've changed Midwest for Middle East
And Campus Gothic for the Wailing Wall.
They gave you a gun, and bullets for the beast,
Trained you, installed you where the blow will fall.

Between patrols you write, along with dreams
Of sprinklers, "I see things now in right relief;
The good stands out. You know what nothing means
Until you choose the beauty of belief."

You've found the truth, guarding a zone of dunes
None but a mule would fight a camel for,
Only a man a man. The wind draws runes
With sand, and rubs them out again with more.

And still I stand my terms before the board,
Erasing mistakes and thinking toward the East
Where you prepare the battles of the Lord
And write me letters full of private peace.

MASTODON

"To sculpt an elephant, chip from a large block
anything that doesn't look like an elephant."

He fell and was drowned too far
from where the confrere dinosaurs
basked in their tar pits
to decompose in peace. He froze
before he could drown, and merely slept
snug in a new block of the pole's building.

And while he slept he became extinct.
He began to wonder, in his glacial way,
being kept so long in nature's antechamber,
whether he was ignored or just forgotten,
and by whom. Who was left?
He forgot.

When the little fellows he remembered
as busybodies with stone-chip spears
attacked the ancient ice and laid him bare,
he found himself so exhausted with waiting
as to have forgotten the protocol.

He could not play the old game, stamping about
trumpeting while they pelted him with brickbats;
for who would not, having lived so long
protected from the passions of the sun,
functionless, ill at ease, wish
merely to rise and step again
into the fumbling hands of the sea?

T. Alan Broughton

Two Poems

AIR POCKET

No one expects the bottom to drop out
when only air is underneath.
We were lulled
by Gable's flashing teeth,
oil of Welk laxly poured in the ear,
skirts at the level of our eyes
whose owners rock us through their friendly skies.
How will we ever trust again
the slight hiss burnishing steel,
the captain's inarticulate babble
bored as a banker listing assets.

Our world lost all its gravity:
coffee rose broadly
delivered of its cup,
Time and *Life* spread wings
and shucked black cases,
a nun, sixty-five and bound for Denver,
proved herself a witch of levitation
kicking her habit higher than her head;
our stewardess shrieked without aplomb
her training useless in an unfixed world.
Down through a hole in the sky,
down like a pelican stone-bound for fish
we plummeted, floating in the chaos of our junk,
the spoons and baubles, shoes, nailclippers, Seven-up

and then we stopped.
Things never change for long.
We looked at the shambles of such dreams:
a stewardess draped indelicately as an houri
and gross confetti space had thrown
over the wedding of dizzy couplings.
Someone coughed, the projector caught up with itself,
a woman sobbed, and already the captain
soothed, full of explanations.
Swiftly we moved ahead. Forward is what we paid for.

But quietly we lifted simple objects
bearing within a wild new power
to turn and rise against us.
One woman cried all the way home to Kansas.

DEADLOCK

He

If only when we argue
I could walk,
shoulders blank to your face
as a wedge of stone,
under the lintel
and out, out
on cindered streets,
my feet burning the grass
in fields beyond the city,
over some last range
of the mountains
where the only pass
would shatter behind me.
But always I circle back
past the cold river
and the dog,
turning to find you
in your own hell,
myself now hell-bent,
singing for return.

Stuart Friebert

WEATHER

You hear yourself called a liar, or at least
she turns the radio up, You made that up, God,
he made that up, just like that! She's listening
for news of the storm, you get so bored you make
up things the weatherman never gets to, Two lows,
three highs coming down from the north, squalls
off the coast, waves likely to crest at 100 feet.
She bursts out laughing, here's your chance not
to have it be END-OF-THE-WORLD. But it always is.

She

Why can't you leave me
here in my ashes,
embraced by demon lovers
or sitting like a spider
fat with spite.
How I could make
this limbo green,
live off the gnawings
of my heart.
Not just content
to give me the music,
partly back
to where we want to be
you must turn your face,
that helpless light of passion
scorched across it,
and I with a wail
must fall back to new hell,
knowing we've only strength
to go halfway.

You stare out the window, the moon drops a mile,
you're having this awful argument, losing ground,
shipping water, etc. Etc! Once you look away it's
too hard to look back, a man stabbed with his own
knife, we know that, but it should be greased and
laid across his bed, Judy. Then I'd know I could
lie down again, hey Judy, where'd you go, dammit!

She's standing in the doorway, getting her weather,
now that he's not to be trusted. Well, she likes it
straight, not filtered, lifts her arms like a sleep
walker, starts into the snow. He waves So long, turns
the radio off, too much to drink. Even tries following
her a bit, straggles, can't make it, crawls back to
the fire, his head freezing. She's colder now too,
it shows in the pretty shake of her head, the moon
in her hands, she pulls them back under her arms.

Wind comes up, spins and twists her back, truth is
he's the one trying to drive her off, she's the one
who comes back, turns the radio on, tuning, receiving.

Bruce Berlind

LEXICON

This word

is playful. It throws a fast curve on the inside.
You lunge.

This word

must be nurtured like a delicate flower. It is
in danger of extinction.

This word

is written on the wall.

This word
is written on the lavatory wall.

This word
is necessary. But of a degree of commonness that
you are perfectly likely to overlook it completely.
Like *or* or *like*.

This word
is a mocker. It deals a straight flush to the
king-ace, minus the queen. It says why quit now?

This word
has nothing good to say for itself, although
everyone else does.

This word
is a haunter. It floats like a childhood memory
in the offings of awareness. When you lift your
binoculars, it has disappeared.

This word
goes wee wee wee wee all the way home.

This word
looks innocent enough. But there is a clinker in
its etymology which could have serious consequences.
Judas tree, for example.

This word
is a word of infinite power which will enhance the
sexuality of its discoverer beyond his wildest dreams.

This word
is a word of infinite power which will enhance the
sexuality of its discoverer beyond her wildest dreams.

This word
requires extraordinary patience. It will not yield
itself easily to the first comer.

This word
will hoist you on its hip if given half a chance.

This word
is a word of supreme candor. Its meaning is the
smell of its skin. It means what it says.

This word
says go directly to jail, do not pass GO, do not
collect anything.

This word
is sesquipedalian, but it changed its name during
the late troubles and has been incognito ever since.

This word
is replete with difficulty. You had best give it up.

This word
masturbates. Repeat it ten times, rapidly, for the
best results.

This word
can change your life—a fact, however, of which you
must remain ignorant. One glance at it, and it will
turn to stone.

This word
resonates an impregnable silence: early morning
mist on a mountain lake, a girl's first blood.

This word
is the name of a secret which you are forbidden to
learn. You may learn only its name.

This word
is the end of a poem.

(Note: the poem is partially indeterminate. The following words should be written, one each, on 3x5 cards, and the deck shuffled before each reading. Turn up the top card after each of the above "statements": belly-button, depravity, ecstasy, eternity, freedom, God, gold, guilt, imagination, incest, irony, knowledge, love, marriage, mirror, poetry, possibility, potato, reality, sleep, soul, vagina, virgin.)

FOR TWO OLD CRONES WHO BURNED A BUY-BOAT

Everybody always said Oh hell
here come those two old biddies, lock the drawers,
don't let anybody out of sight when they're near.

But what they stole was never anything
except what everybody has to have and live,
a chance, which isn't anybody's owning anyway.

So we'd roll by in the truck, slow and blaring
country on the radio but nothing ever waved back
or even showed in that windowless shack.

Some said they were harmless, never meant
the thing they swore because of what the wholesalers
did to them. Didn't they do that to everybody

all those years? That night the Bethel Church
poured its sweet blue light over the marsh and
the preacher winked his good eye, we knew

the buy-boat's hull already had hit the mud
but not two with no names in her. Now we all say
they'd steal your eyes while you looked

unless you stank and fished and starved
almost to death. Nobody cares what you cry for
when you're crazy old and crazy lonely.

And we don't even slow down when we run
Ridge Road past the shack, but we always grin
when the country rocks and in the baitstore

where no buy-boat owner has ever spit
at the fire, there's two or three who'd mash you
if you said their right names wrong.

A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY

The first morning she said,
"Blueberries! And in this soil!"
Farther back in the forest
she found strawberries.
She picked them and filled the kitchen
with their softness. Beyond
the strawberries she came on wild
raspberries, and a section away from them
she found white ovular berries,
unidentified, and bitter to taste.
As I stand here, cooking and washing,
I make faint little groans. Then I eat.
She has been gone for six days.
But at night I hear her hoarse cries of excitement.

RETRIEVALS

This must be home because I am throwing sticks
out to a dog who groans with arthritis.
He cannot remember his name. He cannot remember
what he should do with the stick. He lumbers
and lurches to where it rests, and then bites it
while his homely eyes study my face for instruction.
No messages there. The branch dangles down
from his mouth; he stands, wheezing and puzzled.

As long as I sit at this table, it is Thanksgiving,
no matter how many relatives die, or how late it gets.
The hostess seems to have cramps, or else
she is praying. And now her sons are excused
and sit downstairs in the darkroom, blissfully stoned.

I raise my glass to the cranberries
and the absent guests: I am alone
unable to stand, to walk away from this feast.

An old friend calls me days later, saying
he is lucky: he has a new lover,
gay this time, and I should come see.
I see: his friend has the face of my grandfather
and stares with a beard like the sepia portrait
that outlived his life for fifty years.
As we play poker, I brood about my father's lands.
They glance at one another's hands, and clean me out.

I drag myself back to this place,
and pull it over the river by hand, looking for remnants
of home among people who only remember themselves.
I write this creaky and antique poem for the woman
the poem once addressed as "you." She cannot
be found. Suddenly I am pulled up like an inverted tree.
My roots wave in the air,

their puzzled stalks as thin as leaves.

THE SOUL AT PEACE

Here is what happens:
first, the colors disappear.
All of them. Twilight comes
all day
 at four,
 whenever you like.

Imagine how quiet it grows.
When the soul is truly at peace,
you can make your own sounds.
The Northern Lights

 breathe,
 in radiant tones.

The wind tires and Mother calls
"Come home, supper is ready."
The body grooms itself smooth
until the hairs are sealed

 underneath,
 no touch.

With the soul at peace,
children march in circles through
the living room, they are dressed as soldiers.
That one, with the paper hat
is about to smash your heart
with the pop-gun he waves over his head.
Or is he? The soul at peace
pulls the gun out of his hand
and breaks it over the knee.

Out here, near the long fence,
I stare at the white sky
and the gray grass, and trotting toward me
is the black dog I once had as a kid.
I hold out my hands.
Under his ears is soft fur
that I scratch.
He says,
"You don't know what you're talking about."

LUCKY YOU

You may well wake up and find yourself
 someday, climbing about this unforgiving land,
 threading among rocks along a faint rough path,
 and trudging under the lee of that ice-sided mountain
 to creep out at last between cliffs
 and be where you were going though you did not know it.
 You will be overlooking a landscape more than a mile below,
 a crazy tangle of sharp-sided boulders,
 swirling forests, and rivers cataracting with steam.
 Facing such quaking abysses
 (across them the birds are tilted back and forth
 like leaves blown from a branch)
 you will discover you have been born
 with a set of rickety wings like Japanese umbrellas
 fastened to your shoulder blades
 with what feel like old elastic garters.
 If you have been particularly lucky and amazingly good
 you are going to be invited to fly.

CLOUDS

Apparently solid as a herd of cattle
 and perfectly quiet
 they while away the atmosphere like grass in a field
 hardly bothering to get up or to bend down.

If we could move as importantly as they do
 as enormously, like whales, never making a sound,
 we'd become a Kublai-cabal of politicians,
 and oppress vast crowds by merely passing slowly.
 Though we were dark and gray at the center,
 they'd vote us blood red honors
 so long as we laid our backs against the sun.

How could a thing so weightless
 lift so and lean on barns?

Whose doors move open and shut
 banging grayly like sea-bells—?

Or suddenly from nowhere make quarrels,
 with black blows and quick shocks like fists
 so that even the rocks spit and erupt with sparks
 and something shifts like distant shipments of furniture.

Without any more reason they will quickly
 tug like kites, more and more buoyant,
 so the top of the sky lifts off

And disappears as white as distant birds
 tilting over the enormous roof of the sea.
 They are being marched off single file to some children's game.
 They hide in a blank perfection of ringing radiant blue.
 But sometime they'll come back as sheep,
 galloping across in numberless armies,
 and cover the sun with their dust like wool.

Mark Jarman

OVERHEAD

The wave hovers overhead
 everywhere, reflecting your face
 in its upswept belly.
 Swimming toward, holding
 back, swimming toward you,

you see your ears sticking out
 white as beached gills,
 your mouth gaping, eyes huge.
 The wave won't come down.
 No angle of bird swoop or fish leap
 or sweep of the hand
 will penetrate or erase it.
 Yet, it won't interfere,
 only move with you,
 like a moon along highways,
 through doors and corridors,
 glaring or comforting,
 whatever you wish, but like a moon
 in every inch of the sky.
 So, you live with it
 as you do with all mirrors
 swarming around you:
 the gleaming upholstery,
 the black windows watching.
 You can stand it. Even,
 you think, stand it off,
 as you dream slyly each night
 of a balcony high above waves
 that collapse into sand.
 But you are always forgiven.
 And rise from bed every morning,
 rise from bed every morning,
 with the wave overhead like a canopy
 and that look on your face
 gleaming back at you.

Richard R. O'Keefe

MOON WASH: CLIENTELE

Hidden from women and the time-clock day,
 Their voices splash in shadows.
 Laughs, a dark graffiti in the woods.
 Whose tubes are full?
 Jokes someone faceless, flushed.

She flirts behind her seven veils of clouds.
 Neighbors negotiate cigars
 And augur harvests. August's almost gone.
 "White Lightning" steals some silver from the small-change stars
 As old boys filter boyhood from the juice.

Ed, Mikey, Norman, Jamey-Joe
 Awash in Appalachia, the dark grove
 Of mystery: the sacrament
 Is ninety proof. Aged, lunatic,
 They flow into each other while the night

Knows nothing: whiskey taxes, death
 The sheriff with a hammer. Trees
 Sway tipsy over the sick creek, as each one dreams
 Himself back from the sober grave. The dark light seems
 A warmth like liquor quickening the dark stream, blood.

The closed-down mine, the strip-mined farm
 Get flooded and appeased,
 Reality (the kids, the grocery bills) distilled
 Into one long moon shot,
 Earth men in moon light dancing with the trees.

THE MAN WHO SUCKED POSTCARDS

Wishing here, wishing there. Blue sky
melts on his tongue.
Every day he sits for hours staring at
the mail slot, listening to the sound it makes
as it tarnishes. He begins
to lose weight.

One morning he notices a doctor in his house
saying "a man cannot live by
one ounce of pulp alone."
"I'm not sick," he answers quietly,
"It's just that all my friends are in distant countries,
licking stamps."

At 12:06 a postcard clicks through the slot—
he hunches, slurps, a gulp, he swallows
but does not smile—it was not particularly filling,
it was only an uncrowded beach
somewhere in Italy.

He vows he will change his life:
for dessert, he buys a 147-page
travel magazine. He begins eating it
country by country.

FLYING

The man in the window seat is terrified
of flying. To make matters worse he is face
to face with the sky. It's a rare view
we're missing, I tell him; he offers me his seat.
Carefully I put my hand on his arm—
to reassure him—and come across a scar.
He explains how the axe fell, how long
he took to heal, the pain, the fifty stitches.
But that was nothing. He prefers blood to air.

I remove my hand and resume a look out.
For a minute I forget myself and cry
"Look at the mountains!" He's afraid to look.
I munch peanuts through the turbulence.
He squeezes his eyes shut, pales and stops
breathing. He is dreaming himself alone and cold
falling, falling through deep, empty places.
I know this by the way he holds nothing
so tightly between his lips and by his sweat.

He catches himself when we settle, but won't move,
doesn't even want to breathe, to knock
anything out of order. I busy myself
with figuring the colors of the snow
while it's still sunny. Even in the dark
we don't speak. It's raining when we land.
A woman meets him at the baggage claim;
he takes her arm, allows himself to smile.
He jumps and lands hard, aching with safety.

ABOUT BONES

Now about my bones.
I see them everywhere I go.
I have so many.
When I fall asleep
they go on growing.
When I die
they increase in number.

Everywhere.
I see them hanging
from subway straps.
I see them moving
under my skin.
I see them stacked,
precariously, in my shoes.
White rifle barrels,
floating ice, white fish
washed up on black sand.
The sun is beating, bleeding.
The fish are standing
on their tails, drinking
the sacrificial blood.
My blood.

They are dragging me to the desert.
They are tying my strait jacket
too tight; pouring blood
in the cracks in my skin,
my skin is dried mud,
under which dogs,
the dogs now,
have buried, planted their bones,

bones from useless limbs,
the bones of prehistoric men,
the bones of orphans, janitors,
the bones of cruel step-fathers,
cripples, chiropractors
and fanatics.

The owners of the bones
are on their way back.

Circling over a graveyard,
my hollow bones
are filled with air.
Living in caves,
I sleep standing up
like the others,
the stalagmites.
Running away,
my car gets stuck in the sand,
the snakes find the open window,
the wound, the entrance
to my body.

I walk touching the wall.
I walk past layers of rock
and buried cities,
past half-completed lives,
women undressing,
through acres of garbage,
past the wrecked car
where the baby is born,
out of the water,
breathing for the first time:
shedding the dead skin:
naked to the world:
a bone
on a plate.

MY BROTHER'S HOUSE

My brother's house. When the gruel isn't ready
The goat children upstairs hammer their heads
On the loose bars of the crib.

In the living room, the piano, a baby grand
Tuned only last week, waits for my brother's fingers,
Though the fingers themselves, mindless,
Would be just as happy tearing orange peels
Or groping for crabs,
Unconcerned should my brother's skills melt away
Like snow in the swamps.

In his spare time before dinner he tries to remember
The face of a friend that lives on
Only in him. She looks young still,
Like a garden, grateful,
Though even in his dreams
She can't speak anymore or sing.

Still, she's closer than his spirit,
A thing of silence, too secret to hint if it's pleased
When my brother sits for an evening with an art book,
Stares for hours at tree paintings
That he hopes something inside will think beautiful.

As he sits there he hums, faintly, a tune
He is not aware of, something composed in his sleep
Drifting up to the mind's edge
With no name, a formless song

Like the sound muttered by giraffes
To the tender leaf tops,
Or the music of turtles singing in the wilderness,
Drifting unheard to the hush
And wash of the sea.

THE COUNSELOR

No doubt tonight in his still apartment
You can hear the scratching of his pen
As he scribbles an angry note to the President
Or prepares instructive packets for friends.
"Throw yourself into life," he advises;
"This is all the country you will get."
The pages pile up. He has time
To spell out the whole story.
He is not expecting anyone.

Call him up in kindness,
Break that silence with news,
And he bores you with tasteless questions,
Whether on your recent vacation
You have fallen far from yourself,
What are you doing to close the gap.
And which of his students will phone up?
He has humbled so many,
So many future teachers with clumsy fingers
Kept back to protect the children.

Even when he's dead we will not admire him;
Even when we lie on our death*beds, no remorse.
After that, while his ghost dreams of the past,
Other problems worry us: rain in the fields,
Puddles that we lie under,
And the soil overhead that blocks our view
Of the moon. But soon
We will learn contentment, master at last
A new slow rhythm for our breath,
Breathing in one eon,
Breathing out the next.

MONOLOGUE OF SOUL

"The soul is no more than human."
—Peter Levi, S.J.

I'm standing on tip toe behind his face.
Our eye sockets almost correspond.
My ears are so close I hear most whispers
and those I can't he doesn't hear either.
He says, "Pardon me" or "Sorry."

At the mouth and nose holes, I'm eating
and breathing whatever comes his way: smoke,
meat, flaccid bread, perfume, cheap wine,
lipstick, the salty taste of skin. Deep
in a pillow I smell the oil of her hair.

I put his skin on like a shirt; only at the root
of bone and blood is me. Caught at muscle
and tendon, I swing with his errors and glories.
The portholes of anal and genital are
passages of touch: the swill and the joy.

Count on me. If he waits without motion,
I beat under his fingernails. Self conscious
other self, I am the itch in the crease of skin,
the drunk inside, a bird at crumbs he leaves.
Shall I say it plainer? The human is soul.

MOTHER VISITS HER MOTHER

You reach for her hand.
There is ivy to water,
a pile of papers to burn.
She speaks about nothing special:
the oven heating, who's called,
her father's leather boots,
and says she was a girl sweeping hearths,
sleeping with bread left to cool,
when her husband running scared ran whiskey.
Old facts keep in a jar like night cream.
Vanishing, you return to her sitting still
in a cane chair on the porch.
The sun warms her arms.
She feels and remembers and is not sad.
Daughter, mother,
what can you say to her
she has not said to herself,
prayers staining her teeth like tea,
the names of children, grandchildren,
great-grandchildren and beyond,
back to her first family.
Going home to her hands and folded cloths,
her murmuring music of sleep,
dearest comfort, uncomfortable dream,
what can you give her
she has not yet given up?

TOMATO WORMS

Red-eyed cud-spitted hook-tailed and tall they clump chubby
legs to the leaf-ledge. Heady

with their camouflage and tired of the jungle interior they
have hedged their numbers forth kicking

their spat-feet arching their backs posturing well, a proud
army. It is their courage

that finally undoes them—this naivete fattened by age—
for I hear their stools. Green hand grenades fall

on the stories beneath them and I begin to pursue them
inspecting their warfare watching their signs content

that they think they are winning. At last I see the red hook
shining in the sun that bright mistake and the only one

I need to take them captive. Aware they hood their military
eyes regroup retreat abandon their spoils of war

and rape for me these palest flowers plump red breasts lie
innocent and rotting on the ground.

Heathen-monsters! Horny hawks! Tough green husks you have
found out old bloody tusks

I kill! And as you fall into my steel-gray pail to writhe
to die believe me, gentlemen,

There is no one so thrilled to watch your death as I.

WORDS

Some go in and never come back.
Corridors join in branching tangles
through which you may wander forever
opening any door that traps your fancy
going from room to room, hall to hall,
as long as your heart holds out.
Now you know you have been nowhere.

There is a better way. Follow one string
ignoring instinct or reason
and you find you descend steadily.
Doors disappear. Branches become walls.
At last the ramp levels off
and you are down. You may leave
the string. You will never need it again.

Step forward to where the snow is black.
Now you have entered the center: midnight
curls around you like aging paper.
However you turn, all directions are night.
You expected the hard, hot muzzle of a bull.
But that would be too easy to face.
Here you are. You may begin.

THE DREAM

At three A.M. I will wake you,
Pinning a shrill bird note between your lips
So that your eyes fall open full of tears.
There will be no milk to comfort you,
No doll to lean on. You will find
That the railing of the crib has fallen down
And that you are quite alone, grown up,
With the phosphorescent hour
Looking you up and down.
You will remember everything
I whisper to your ear,
Even the nakedness I have given you,
Even the small round scar in your belly,
Even the small jelly hearts going tick
In the dish, and the sky full of bleeding stars,
And the dead black cat
And the ants that you stepped on
So that they cracked open like walnuts
And the glass bottle rolling off
A slanting world.
I will not leave you. I am here to stay—
The mother you swallowed up,
The father you swallowed whole.

AN EARLY EXPERIENCE WITH SIN, JUDGMENT,
ETERNAL DAMNATION AND REDEMPTION

When I was five my mother found the matches
behind the davenport. They were dead
black cripples, the smell was gone
and the wallpaper didn't burn
more than an inch or two
no matter how I peeled it
but all of her masks plunged into the earth
and stuck there
like prehistoric art
and all of the birds and animals
in my mind
darted out of sight
and her face was a tunnel
of pure white light
that led to Eskimo hell
and Arab hell
and on to a ladder that would bring us out
somewhere on the surface of the earth.

ON WEARING MY FATHER'S OLD SOCKS

Father, you have shed your name.
Your blood tints the shadows on the ceiling.
In your hands
the hammer and gun are soft.

Look, your thumbs are the stones
and in the hayfield cattle rise around you
and creak like ships
turning for home. You say nothing.
Your legs are soaked to the knee.

You taught me corn, peeling back
the thick husk and brushing the silk
with your lips. We prowled the quiet
avenues of sex as you dented kernels
with a thumbnail.

You taught me grease, grease
in the knuckles which lasted
for weeks and grew roots to the elbow.
You leaned into machinery and blew
anger over its joints
while I stood back like a nurse
holding the flashlight.

You taught me water. We drank
from the same tin cup.
We patched the floodgates
with rusty wire
and felt like gods in the mud.
When the river grew quiet and sang
of its children, we rested
our hands in the ripples, fingered smooth stones
and dreamed of the next flood.

Adrien Stoutenburg

Two Poems

STRUCTURES

These knobs, these minor huts
(a tiny company town)
lodged in a row beneath my skin
are the knuckles of my living hand
on which my right reach
and my grasp depend.

And these attendant shapes
strung out like rays
toward my deep pulse
(almost a crow's-foot game
tricked out of common twine)
are tempted into strings and flutes
and hammer-strikes where,
on the soft side of my wrist,
a blue piano plays.

These are the stirrups of my feet,
the arches and spurs that carry me
through blowing streets and days
toward nights as brittle as an aphid's lip.

The dunce caps where my thighs begin or end
are my strict knees that bend
in one direction only—prayer.

These are my ribs,
this curved stockade around my breath,
a creaking circus ring
where shadow-shapes perform:
sad dwarfs on stilts,
contortionists, pale clowns,
and tumblers in a blare of silk
timing their antics to a drum.

And this, below, where body forks
like a mandrake root
is the inflexible frame
above the narrow locks
of pubic bones—those grudging gates
between delivery and death
that barely give, even in birth.
Just here the whirl comes down
from thorax, phalanges, salty spine,
and that red magistrate
where the sternum lifts
its guardian altar like a sword.

Maxilla, sacrum, sockets, nails,
and my round skull
(that high loft packed with brine
and want and wind) . . .
this is my skeleton entire,
a scaffold in its brittle sleeves,
designed to bear the whining weight
of breath and gut and flesh,
but not regret's insistent tooth
nor the marrow-ache of unspent love.

ANYWHERE

And, so, within this inmost state
where the snail lives curled
and the turtle schemes under his green roof
and the spider knits like a grandmother—
within this web, this dark,
this woven spell, self-woven,
nothing is complete
for all its tight, curved inwardness.

The sky hangs over all
and is flash or gray as it wills.
The wind hunts under all
and is fierce or sweet as it chooses.
The sun still rises—
how it charges my sleeping eyelids—
and falls. Somewhere it is drunk in the sea.
Here it impales itself on mountains
wearing snow like a new, white forest.

I am alone in this inmost state,
but surrounded by the quick and old graves of grass,
and by young trees with the sense to try to live.

My desk is with me, and some books.

My breath remains. I am using it
in an inward, outward way
for some unknown purpose.

The inmost thing, within, locked like a knife,
is not breath, is not heart, is . . .

a knot in the bone, a knuckle in the chest,
a sense of great distances
that cannot be vaulted, being too blue,
the air too rare.

Something spins there
if not in me. Something glides
into the dream of a dream.

But that is outer, outward, beyond.

The snail, curled like a gray finger,
is resident here
and its cheek is damp.
The spider keeps a dry workroom.
The turtle is in love with fish.

We live together in harmony,
ignoring the birds
in the country far beyond us.

MEETING THE BONES

The bones are drunk again.
As night falls, as shadows
step into shadows and the bells
in the old church tower
announce midnight, I hear
them coming before I see them.
They stop to rest every few feet,
fall against lampposts, trip
over curbs. Moving slowly
into view, they lurch
down the dimly-lighted street
in search of sleep.

Just as we are about to collide
I step aside to let them pass.

The next thing I know,
I awaken behind a row of bushes,
not far from a small circle
of light at the edge
of the park. A policeman
stands over me, his flashlight
bent to my face, the faint
fall of a fountain overflowing
in the distance. He bends
down to test my breath and asks
me my name and where I live.
He asks me what happened.
I fix my face in a smile
and tell him I don't remember.
The bones inside me are laughing.

THE BONES IN SEARCH OF A BED

A hand comes up the banister.
Outside the bedroom door
they hesitate.
The wind hushes
under the door
and the angle of light
opens slowly.

I slide over the side
of the bed
and pull myself in
under it. The bones
stop beside the side
of the bed and the bed
takes their weight
like a shadow disappearing
in the dark.

They stretch out above me,
adjusting their shapes
to the shape I made
in the sheets.
Beneath them on the dusty floor
I fall asleep
in the empty sack of my skin.

RENTING MY BED TO THE BONES

I have rented my bed
to the bones.
They came saying they needed
a place to sleep.
All night I dug in the dark,
working my way around stones,
pulling up roots of trees,
clearing the plot.
At last the earth opened
like water.
When the hole was wide enough
and deep, breathing
evenly in the dark air,
the bones stepped
into it like owners
and lay down.
They shifted their weight
slightly to find
a comfortable rest and then
fell asleep. I covered
them over with the soft earth
and left. The rent
will not be due for years.

AFTER CENTURIES

After centuries
the arms have come free.
I put my hands to my head,
find the tucked-in end,
and begin to unwind
the bindings.
My head half-exposed,
my eyes begin to adjust
to the dim light.
Around me the bones are piled
in awkward piles.
My nose takes in
the stale smells.
I loosen the belt of bandages
around my waist,
then bend
to undo the bandages
surrounding my legs.
The bones are as white as ash.
I rest, stretch,
relax. The bones come together
again, beginning
to unbend. I stand.
I totter toward the wall
and brace myself near the door.
A light as fine
as dust, and the color
of blood, seeps in
under the door and puddles
beneath my feet.

About Our Contributors

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