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Poetry

NORTHWEST



POETRY NORTHWEST

VOLUME THIRTEEN

NUMBER FOUR

WINTER 1972-73

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POETRY NORTHWEST

WINTER 1972-73

James Grabill

Five Poems

WAKE

Light gathers beneath the skin, pulsing white water,
pulling the sky down, charging the air with microscopic
rains and threads, keeping us close, nearby. . . now the
hands are floating away like moons. Their souls are in
the water drums and transparent bells of the ears. They are
soothing the fists of the inner ear, speaking in low sounds,
resonance, colors of sound. . . tonight, light is all around.
I have been asleep and want to wake. Listening to Bach and
Bartok. Miriam painting in the other room. Traveling behind,
traveling ahead. Reading Stump Farming. The wall flashes
into sounds of human breathing, smells of tart flesh moving
on flesh. . . If I could see through, I would say there are
rivers beneath the streets. I would say each house is a lung
with formica paneling and rayon carpeting covering the
pure wooden floors. I would say the apple is a wheel that
will go anywhere, that there is no joy greater than falling
into water, than the faint smell of dust in air turning
cooler! I would say there is no feat greater than burning
as a sun, in your own images, in your own meditation. . . if
I were awake, I would say, "this dream, this dream!" and
blank out the world to see, as if a tree were leaping up and
running, or a stone threw itself into the air, to knock
against the particles of ozone, as if all around there are
only stones moving, knocking together, vibrating under light,
the undulating stones of sleep, the thin leaves of stones. . .
it is, as if nothing stood still, to be counted on, and that
was all. . . if I close my eyes, there are wings coming out my
temples, as if my brain were a sea gull ready to dive for
fish. . . there is no joy greater than entering water, changing

TREES

"Circumspice!"

All around us,
Trees with extended powers!—
Five-winged Maple.
Jagged tongues of Ironwood.

Fish-shaped leaves
Swimming over the cabin.
Continuing green flame.

Trees moving their one syllable
And each peasant
Who is us,
Eating from the garden—
Seeds cakes,
Sprouts we can enter!

And all around us,
The open faces of Oak.
Visible ghosts of Elm.
Talking Ash.
Trees whose hands are lungs
Turned inside out,
Whose brains are turned out
Into the sky!—

Trees, good spirits,
Give us air to breathe.
Give us your breath.

AFTER RAIN

There are barges of pure earth floating in the air,
The bodies of grass pulsing,

Steam breaking like skins from our bodies,
Lifting the rainbow of flesh above us,

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Waiting to be open
Waiting to become fire
Like a root burning over fields

I pray to hear I pray

Mark McCloskey

Four Poems

THE STYLES

My house recalls her like a soupy uncle;
even the chairs gain weight praising her.
My past itself takes her in its arms
and sits her down to its madness—
the snow, the slow roads, the parlors
that don't know what to do with sunlight,
my friends training their nouns like pets.
My books, too, pick up on her:
some even follow her home,
and others parse her name in their sleep.

She, of course, can do without them—
the furnitures, the holdings, the fictions.
She is surrounded by her own needs;
they come at her like bankrupt Italians,
talking fast as though nothing were wrong,
sometimes in the white gloves of self-pity.
Her highstrung musics with their fat legs,
the fanmails she feeds adverbs to;
even the ocean with its greasy hair:
her future is the history of all this,

as mine is only taking it all in.
I don't know how else to say distance,
that love sets up its flags there,
that no one can make them out for the wind.
My own effects confuse her with themselves,
like Iceland imagining an ostrich:

NORTHWEST

and it is this perhaps I don't want
to risk losing? Not to mention the fish—
sucker, garbage-mouth, but big,
the only big one I'd ever caught.
Why come down from that? Why
be usual at this stage of memory?

You understand. To put it
this way—if I should come with you,
it would be because you want me to,
because I like the taste of killing
and would use love to salt it, make up for
whatever comes to nothing in the mountains.

A MAP OF THE KINGSTON QUADRANGLE, RHODE ISLAND

The headlights on the freeway bubble toward me.
Are they an inlet from the ocean? Here I go
to that ocean that stopped the long adventures.
The last bar on the beach is their basement—
the pony of Red Fox, the cavalry war flags
hanging from the ceiling in powders,
the wing from the Great War; the spoons
and wicker perambulators of the New World
oxide and kindling now; the sawdust on the floor.

The first house I had was high up,
and there were wild strawberries all around it;
it was torn down. The second one had holes
in the floorboards, a cold-wave came;
the third one flooded, dead worms seized it;
the fourth one went mad from sonic booms;
the fifth one had a landlord in the keyhole.
Now my wife is gone, my children are postcards,
my neighbors flush my sleep in their walls.

And I am driven to the sea edge like a sewer,
thinking I have never made my own decisions,
being a dainty will, a mere historian

no man can swim in,
and you will skirt it like a road."
Oh I was halfwit then,
and sang for the short times left—
sang like a phone, like a match,
sang like vein on wristbone,
sang till the tears came.

Roberta Hill

Two Poems

SLEEPING WITH FOXES

You burst into the world with smiles wide as April,
a crimson baby, blossoming, called Rosa.
They drenched you, not knowing it dwarfed indian magic,
and you were blessed with names of flowers, saints. Dad's guitar
rusted near toys. You, a red-brown nugget among sparrows,
ran to touch azaleas, Lou'siana tenderness,
and chased chickens during hurricanes.

When you were ten, the neighbor boys tied, burned a savage.
Mother pulled you, crying, from the flame.
On the shaker porch, when spring rain whipped
trees, we philosophized as children
about drops caught in our eyrie. Small eagles,
one in blue flannel, longing for leaden wind and pride.
Lady who no longer lives with time,
listen, take this ragged shawl, this dew.

The years have swung roughly since you left Denver.
Stones anchor these mountains.
Where or how can I reach you?
I've checked mail from Lake Tahoe
and points east, asked detectives
who confessed you were a bride, a bone.
Are you sleeping with foxes, nosedeeep in warmth,
buried in thickets of blackberries and ground fog?

A FIGMENT OF FIRE-BREATHING

After the dragon tonight your hand is a legend; the street is mystic with stories. The stories all flow into an underground river, but the milk coating your mind coats pure space.

After the dragon you stop for a shake and thicken two lives in a Western Drug. A fat Billy the Kid tosses a bullet into the mixer. Over the counter every moment is a double conjuring.

After the dragon you have your version. 1872. The gun-fighter is in contact with the fire in his throat. He is always moving in, moving in flush with the bulk in his dreams. And after the dragon, silence. They tie him up in a coffin and lower him, dreams and all, into the river where the legendary Fortis is known to love to hunt the dragon.

And after the dragon, sucking the snake of milk through a straw, you speak in two directions, changing your mind constantly, biting your own tail.

After the dragon Fortis slept in a circle of suns. The largest he selected for his mate. From their union the earth issued, and the moon went the way of a notched gun. Fortis didn't love the moon, but he tipped a mood thataway, like everyone else after the dragon.

Or after the dragon the Kid is a saint with a silver stomach. He picks his nose to think. With nothing wild, one of his kidneys draws a royal flush and becomes immortal. He is fat with immortality. You do not worry about the bullet; he will have to take it out of his own chest. The man in the coffin puts the rope to sleep, eases out of the coffin and swims to shore. The Kid lays down a bloody nose.

do not eat
anything that has entered
your smile

to fortify the lost sense
of a balanced diet do
not count on
the weightlessness
of surplus vitamins
to keep you anonymous

do not count on wm penn
letting you eat words

in the interests
of public hunger
affix this label to your
mouth and
eat what should be
in there swimming silently
around and around
behind your signature

THE SYLLABUS

- A. Sit down quietly.
Do not sit down
with a knife drawn between
the sexes. Build a fire.
When the flames reach
my mouth, signal your intention
to ask me a question
by smiling.
- B. Do not speak.
Speak like a prophet
to your smiling memory.
Break your chair into words,
into a sentence with a backswing.

Awake in the operating theater
we need to be reminded: these
are real people behind the white masks.
Needles, knives, flash in corroboration.

You will make us cleaner than thou,
walking our dark streets
where dirty rain falls,
where joy reeks.

We called you, and waited hours.
Now your reminiscences
at our bedside are terrible.

STRETCHING FENCE ON OUR ANNIVERSARY

Six a.m., the grass white as platinum
with cold dew; an acre away
woodpeckers drill for breakfast.
Fence posts you drove yesterday
lift like weir stakes in the wet air.

The roll of wire we push
leaves a wide plush track on the slope.
Stumbling, I let go. One end whips back
striking my thigh with fire.
We go on rolling; at the first post
hook on, cut baling wire, join with the pliers
and turn the roll,
all snarls like a bad dream.

The sun's full up now, the aluminum
look of the metal darkens to blue;
hook on, cut, join with the pliers.
If I let go at the wrong time
the wire will snap a strip from my hide.
You lean down the slope
and I lean back, keeping our boundary taut.
Here we hang in morning silence:
hooked on, joined, and rusting together.

PLAY DEAD

1

As a kid I'd throw
up my capgun, stagger back, drop
to a knee, hug my stomach,
grunt, fall face first and
lie still
holding my breath. My friends
approved and once lifted
my stiff body off
the driveway and carried me into
the hayfield where, clearing
away thistles, they laid me down
and covered me with alfalfa.

2

Balled like a small fly
trapped, killed and stored
the spider over the kitchen
door knows death is the
best ambush

and we
learn death is the best
escape from death:

after the ship sinks
and the lifeboat capsizes
let your arms and legs
hang down and, your stomach
buoyed up by the life
jacket, float
like a dead man
till rescued—or caught lost
in a snowstorm, bury
yourself in a snowdrift

HOW TO BE HAPPY: ANOTHER MEMO TO MYSELF

You start with your own body
then move outward, but not too far.
Never try to please a city, for example.
Nor will the easy intimacy
in small towns ever satisfy that need
you have only whispered in the dark.
A woman is a beginning.
She need not be pretty, but must know
that everything serious is funny,
and no less serious for it. She must
aspire to the unoccupied space in rooms,
above the crowd. Together you must love
to exchange gifts in the night,
understanding the superfluity of ribbons,
the fine violence of breaking out
of yourselves.

No matter,
it is doubtful she will be enough for you.
Or you for her. You must have friends
of both sexes. When you get together
you must feel everyone has brought
his fierce privacy with him
and is ready to share it. Prepare
yourself, though, to keep something back;
there is a center in you
you are simply a comedian
without. Beyond this, it is advisable
to have a skill. Learn how to make something:
food, a shoe box, a nice day.
That should be enough.
Remember, finally, there are few pleasures
that aren't as local as your fingertips.
Never go to Europe for a cathedral.
In large groups, create a corner
in the middle of a room.

INSOMNIA

Somewhere someone, I hope,
takes on big questions.
I've tried. I do not.
Something ails the scope
bounded by what-not and—what?
Will my shirt last one more day?
Why this hacking cough?
Camels, Kents, or gum?
Does coffee ruin digestion?
There's three thousand miles on the oil.
Our kitchen sink still drips.

Unblinking checker at Sam's
Stop-n-Shop: stop. Madame,
were you aware you charged
nine cents too much for the soap?
Were you annoyed I was annoyed?
(With plumbers eight dollars a trip
plus ten dollars an hour . . .)
Talkers whose points I barged into,
who did not hear my suggestions,
am I one you'd like to avoid?
(We can live with the sink.)
Poodle that squirts on our doorstep,
why that particular spot?

I refold my pillow
and try to broaden scope.
Dry uncle, do you think,
seeing how your life has turned out,
you might as well have drunk?
You are my favorite stoic; but
what do you get for your pains?
Friend, your mother's death
was two years ago; forget it.

(two winks) the clock (left shrug right shrug). Nights
of intermittent yapping yipping—grating
like the sometimes scraping branch at window. Listening,
he could not pattern that to make sense: listening,
he could not long stand the lapses when
it stopped, before it started again.

After some muddled weeks (two left two right)
he had taken his .32 target pistol, which
he found now on the desk as he talked (left shrug
right shrug), up the hill to stop the confusion.
The night there (he snapped the gun) had been so dark,
some rocks kicked loose had finally struck so far
(two snaps) below, he had to sit down in the road.
Too near to the ditch he just held on
to the gun at least (two snaps), held on to the gun
by the barrel. Back home, he said, uncertain of his aim,
he kept in mind that order is a game
that no one (snap) wins (snap), it is a game.
He watched the hill and listened just the same.

Lewis Turco

LANDSCAPE

Winter is hanging fire behind the sun.
Back of my eyes, a leaf grows its shadow.
Beyond that there are hills turning to fall,
and a river is disturbed by the sound—
like water casting over the millsite
beside a road curling near the graveyard.
Earth is flesh lying upon the ridges
of these eastern places. Wind makes it move
as though it were a sleight of vetch or elm.
It is a hard thing to say where we stand
as shadow lies beneath the leaf, beneath
clay and moss the colors of winterlight.
Silence is hanging fire behind the moon.

NORTHWEST

manifestoes. Tomorrow, foreigners will read rumors in newspapers. . . . Oh, sir, your death would be a tiresome journalistic subject so stay still till we're done. This is our season. The building is surrounded. No more poetry tonight. We are discussing, you'll be pleased

to know, the terms of your release. Please read these leaflets. Not poetry. You're bored to death with politics, but that's the season's subject.

John R. Carpenter

Two Poems

APOLLO AND MARSYAS

The contest is over, the prize awarded
To Apollo. Marsyas howls, flayed alive
For having challenged a god.

The victor mingles with the judges
And well-wishers, lovers of technology;
He speaks of numbers and formulas,

Of ancient myths whose names recall letters
Engraved in stone. They listen in rapt attention,
Ignoring the sickening cries of Marsyas.

Apollo is honored with a monument—
A machine is installed underground
And rows of moving parts glint as they hum

Through the night, storing his information.
The guardian tiptoes past in awe when he hears
The sigh of its twenty-foot ventilator grill.

As a curiosity they kept Marsyas' skin;
It was dried, the hair gone and thin
As paper, punched full of holes.

NORTHWEST

THE WAY IT HAPPENS

So you trust like the birds
in God's goodness.
You refuse to calculate.
You go naked.
This lasts years.
You wander.
You are never satisfied.
That is the point.
Again you renew your trust.
Soon you begin
to peck at the ground.
You do not notice this.
You only know
you savor small grain.
Then you learn to make
a new sound.
This gives you pleasure.
You think nothing of it.
Next you develop ridges
at your side that grow
and feather.
You use these
to tuck in your head.
You believe that is not strange.
Finally, for no good reason,
you beat them.
You begin to fly.
By now you are not thinking
at all
of what you are doing.

Because all these desires
Are endings
For a sky that is endless

A sky whose vague stars
Have twins
Failing on the sea's surface

I find myself as on any night
Between the two heavens
Singing a song

About life that divides them
Without an end
Without even a good beginning

Gerald W. Barrax

BIG BANG

Some kind of flying insect—
its existence beginning
only in my periphery
and ending at the windshield,
exploding
in death / the yellow shape
a galaxy.

Between those worlds and me
just right of eye level
other systems are coming into being
worlds without end.

If I can push a button and bring water,
turn a knob and wipe it all away,
why not someone else?

INTO A DROWSE OF ARMS FIRED

Once it was
an actual graveyard I went to,
overrun with grasshoppers
in the treeless field
where my Chippewa relatives slept,
however fitfully,
(and the rest—
in another part of town—
thought they owned their ground . . .)
and the old parting pacts were kept:
every Sunday unless it rained
my mother and I pulled weeds
and, kneeling, remembered
each one's habits
or how the wool would bite my face
roughly concealing each breast
darkened in a white world
as we sat out every after-supper time.
Winter after winter
the smell of venison and tobacco
would cloud me as I climbed
to a mountainous knee
and laughed at the laughing
of the tall men and women
who joked and storied all my dusks
into a drowse of arms fired
by snapping stoves
and the mild starlight.
And I would stop, like this, my hands
full of pigweed, to recall
the timbering that broke the back
of their days and hands
blistered for the blood that finally stalled
like their time that I knew
would never be completed in me

GOLDEN GLOVES

He ate right, slept right, lived right,
training for Golden Gloves,
worked out every day
the way ballet improves
step by step by step—
cut bad once in L.A.,
still he kept it up.

And how his mother worried
about his ears and nose—
his father crowed with pride
wild in the smoky rows—
those shoulders under the lights,
what a left, what footwork—
the new world champ—who knows?

But he got knocked for a loop
on his big night in Chicago—
never the same again—
paunchier and slow,
he sells sporting goods,
showing, in better moods,
punk kids the old one two.

It is always enough, even for the blind.
Love is a kind of choosing,
A calloused hand bleeding the Sibyl's quiet song
That has sought to reach me and now seeks the earth.
"You must learn to face your fears"
Mother used to say
But I look at my hands.
These lines tell a fortune—years of choosing
And loving:
No cracker barrel revelations.
I can see what's coming, blood welling
Through fingers, falling, falling to the leaves.
And I lean on my hands until the pulse in the palm
Shakes the cold earth, in answer to the leaves
Gently.

Robert L McRoberts

TRYING TO WRITE BEFORE THE LAST
PRO-FOOTBALL GAME OF THE YEAR

I regroup and shift
some veteran lines, ask
myself, why all tercets

here? There, again. And that last word
slipping down
field to this stanza. Think: ho-hum,

tonight Bart Starr is narrating
a show on great
passers, great

receivers. Think: found
poem, *Losers, Weepers*
but hear no crying yet.

read *Ulysses* and eat olives: I dream
of exotic positions on indoor putting greens,
bent over chromeglass tables, among the olive eaters
for whom this is old stuff yet oblige.

The sun is pale as milk here
between the gangs of pines;
but I plow in coffee grounds and moldy salad
with rare hope.

Rob Swigart

THE WIND TUNNEL

The director holds one ear away from the buffeting.
With his hand he describes an airfoil
in the empty space his sandwich left;
he knows he's lost his final chance of flight.

Mechanism has taken over his dreams,
releasing a milky rush of statistics into the sheets.
And though he understands the concept of limits
in terms of lift and drag, he doesn't believe

blood and sinew and bone, the teguments
of waking shredding away at dawn,
can lift his feet from the bottom of his day
to a hollow place, where the wind booms.

Yet he has that itch at the neck's base
and moves his shoulder blades together in his coat,
half-hoping, even though he knows
that the wax melts as the sea waits.

rabbits no longer sit in the grass at dawn.
many things stir in the hissing waters.

after dinner we settle down,
in striped lawn chairs, before our houses,
in the bug-free evenings of october,

powerless and hungrier than before.
in the dense aroma the children rattle coins,

each one stamped with a hat and a rabbit.
"o we know where to spend them," they say.

when it is dark we go to bed,
fully clothed, napkins tucked in our collars,

ready at every moment for the bell
that calls us to this desperate cuisine.

DIRECTIONS

like a game-losing error, the magician
continues to haunt us. we find his key

in our mailbox, notched with promises.
we return at night to find messages
that he has phoned. should we be disturbed

that no one was home to take his calls?

we *are* disturbed. in the classified section
under "personal" is a notice advising us
to contact him at once. at the intersection
is a sign reading "MAGICIAN: 5 Km."

the arrow points straight ahead. the light
changes. the cars behind us are honking.

THE FIST, THE SUN, THE PALM

day lily, back, forth, back
forth, back, breathing, breathing, rocking
rocking throat, the throat, opening
opening, the fresh opening dragon
lily, banana speckled stomach, peeling
peeling, standing, the light striking
sweet, sweet sun
the unwrapping of the purple tissue Iris
jack-in-the-box, shutting, leaping, shutting
leaping, the sour night fleeing, the sun
swinging, swinging, back, forth, the lily
opening, to a raw sun, throat crisp bursting
stemming, stemming of the celery in
the central valley, jutting, pushing, the night
plow, seven mushrooms punch and fruit, fruit,
spilling, spilled. the spore soaring, again
the fist, again the fist, the sun, the palm,
the fist the sun the palm, clenched in the storm,
the sun striking the fingered valleys,
the slivered ear lobe, the lily, the lily
unravel, unraveling, cold, and wind, the fist,
fist, fist, palm, palm, and sun
rain, sun, rain, sun, rain and calm, stems
springing, the white root is falling down
the leaf is crisp, it breathes, back, forth,
back the wind, it sheds, the wrist shoots out
the wrist shoots out of the sleeve, again
the fist, the fist swollen in the storm, yellow
in the sun, the outlet, the damp throat, the damp
fingers running in my arm
the lily pistil standing in the water, the wind
rocking, throat open, fresh

BURGLARS AT NOON

"Burglars break in at noon."—W. H. Gass

They are sleeping now, lying in the grass, turning green and forgetting.
Beneath stone they are quiet, tangled in the roots of trees,
Growing dark and rotting like bones, broken and forgotten, buried
Long ago with wood that crumbled and words that fell to the ground
and were lost.

But I have seen them, staring from rock, rising in water, moving up
Out of the sun, turning with faces in ruins, scratching at windows,
They were howling at doors in broad daylight, covering the land, thickly
as dying leaves.

The grave, the size of the cathedral, a single bell, echoes
Falling like rocks. In the garden, light falls, waking the weeds,
Snails sliding through the wet air, frogs digging in for winter,
The spiders walking through the grass, preparing for change,
getting ready.

NIGHTSONG

Above them now the day is silent. The air has stopped and far away
The moon splashes on the sound of a voice of someone I don't know.
The earth slides across an empty window, and the lengthening night
Is heavy and black as soot. The halls are thick with lies and guards
Walking through walls whispering to themselves.

I said the light

Is breaking down like sleep and warmth goes out of the vacant rooms,
Out of the perfectly smooth white cells that have become home. From
The corner sink song rises one more time, from the men who have fallen
In love with their pillows, where all blood becomes itself. They try
To rise from themselves, try to walk away from the blank face on the
Wall, from the lives they cannot find. They turn once on the hard
Cots, adjust the gray blankets, close their eyes and live.

THE ABSENCE FLAG

In memory of James Hall
Professor of English
University of Washington
1949-1971

Now you are away. The absence
Flag is flown over your yacht.
The owner? He's unknown. Under
The ground his whereabouts. So
Now grass is sparse above the

Too-late-shelter of your casket
("we are proud you chose it,"
Our letter from the coffin's
Maker said.) This flag (of
Blue) this rectangle above

The main yardarm of your old
Yacht, shall stay. Not that
you went A.W.O.L. from life,
But just the same, did life
Give you the will to stay?

The flag is flown over your
Yacht to state: the owner
Who has been, who was loved,
Who taught us much, is called
Suddenly (finally?) by earth.

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POETRY NORTHWEST reminds its readers that it is the recipient of a \$500 grant from the federally sponsored Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines. Since that amount has been given to us in the form of matching funds, every tax deductible contribution in support of *Poetry Northwest* from you, our readers, will be doubled until we reach that figure.

