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NORTHWEST



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# POETRY NORTHWEST

VOLUME THIRTY-TWO

NUMBER FOUR

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WINTER 1991–92

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GREGORY DJANIKIAN Three Poems . . . . .	3
NAOMI CLARK Three Poems . . . . .	6
GEORGE DREW Three Poems . . . . .	11
RONALD WALLACE Two Poems . . . . .	16
PAMELA GROSS Breughel's Bird . . . . .	18
DAVID BIESPIEL Two Poems . . . . .	19
GLORIA BOYER Cane Toad Wars . . . . .	22
JANET HOLMES The Dog Season . . . . .	23
DEBORAH SLICER Two Poems . . . . .	24
COLETTE INEZ Ohio Letters . . . . .	26
CHRISTIANNE BALK Two Poems . . . . .	28
JENNIFER SNYDER Two Poems . . . . .	30
JEFF WORLEY Two Poems . . . . .	34
MELODY DAVIS Two Poems . . . . .	36
JOANIE MACKOWSKI Three Poems . . . . .	38
CECILE GODING Two Poems . . . . .	44

*Gregory Djanikian*

Three Poems

MRS. KINSEY'S HOUSE OF CHILDREN

We are in Mrs. Kinsey's house  
and it is full of farm children  
dropped off each day, Martha and Noah,  
Caleb and Abigail, too young  
to drive cows or tractors, or cut hay.

Sometimes there are eight; today, eighteen.  
The shy ones are in the corners looking tremulous,  
the bold ones have claimed the best of the toys,  
and Mrs. Kinsey is tending to all of them,  
the bruised and fallen, the loutish and ever willful.

"Oh, they're good children," she says  
as she coaxes Eunice off her sister's chest  
or gently unlocks the arm around Erwin's head.  
"Some need more than others," she says,  
"and don't they have the harder time of it?"

Outside, Cyril is dangling from a branch  
by one thin leg, Willy has pitched a stone,  
and Helen is snagged in the raspberry bushes,  
and Mrs. Kinsey is trotting in and out  
among the pandemonium of children,

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retrieving strays and steering danger  
away from heart and bone.

If, once, we could hear her shout  
or ever see her raise an ugly hand,  
we could say, yes, we know her limits now  
and aren't they much like ours?  
Justice be served, we would say,  
and the smallest crime find retribution.

But this is Mrs. Kinsey's house  
where we are sitting and talking softly  
and being our kindest selves all afternoon.  
There are children all about us,  
Adam and Sarah, Betty and Everett,  
and Mrs. Kinsey is passing out crackers  
and juice and pats on the head  
to saints and villains alike.

"Maybe you'd like some to," she says,  
turning our way, coming toward us,  
and we are saying, "Thank you, thank you,"  
along with Lara and Eben, Joshua and Rachel,  
quietly, and all of us, for a moment, deserving,  
in spite of what we may be, or might become.

#### UNHAPPINESS

It is an island (poor wretch!)  
you might find yourself on,

dispossessed of almost  
everything, even regret,

the crates of your belongings  
bobbing horizonward like small goodbyes

and even your loved ones  
winging away in the last rowboat.

Nothing now but this unbearable heat  
you finally can't imagine your days without,

and once in a while, the wind-driven clouds  
with their faint promise of *somewhere else*.

Soon this hopelessness you begin  
relying on, how easy and poignant

to count the glass bottles  
which somehow keep washing back,

to feel the island itself,  
through tidal ebb and rise, slipping away.

Nothing but sky blurring beautifully  
into water, nothing but blue

into unerring blue, except, of course,  
for the cruise ship suddenly heading your way,

billowing its white smoke  
and blasting jubilation out of its horn,

which, now, you can make no sense of  
and for which you can find no place

even though the gangplank is swinging down  
and hundreds from the deck are shouting your name.

#### FOR US

Moonlight, and the cows are lowing  
in the high pasture, and the Black River  
is passing now under the bridge  
that spans farm and farm.

And we are on that bridge  
looking at the dark water flecked

with silver, momentary, elusive.  
What makes us say, *This is beautiful?*

Fireflies are jewelng the woods,  
the blackberries beyond are lush and dark,  
still the sweet smell of cut hay rounds us  
and the world is suddenly, briefly, ours.

And if I kissed you now,  
wouldn't there be tremors through the wild roses,  
nuances, quiverings in the aspen leaves?

And even if the moon were shining tonight  
for a hundred lovers unfolding under the trees,  
wouldn't we still whisper, *For us, for us?*

*Naomi Clark*

Three Poems

#### OMENS

Winter. An apple-green scorpion  
climbs beside the light switch I just flipped on.

Incoming tide makes a garden—  
in the print of a horse's hoof, a salt pool:  
torn eelgrass, a crab claw, three grey pebbles,  
sand dollar skeleton smaller than a shirt button,  
tiny cockleshell, purple and brown and ivory,  
barnacle-covered stone like a cluster of white allium.

Two A.M.  
Blood on the pillow, the mirror.

A hospital room with big windows. A crane beside the framework  
of a new building raises a chemical toilet; men hammer, talk,  
gesture. In the night, sirens, big planes; a helicopter lands

on the roof. Dawn. The city becomes visible again, lights  
disappear into daylight and fog.

A young deer lies dead on the beach—  
legs bent as though running,  
head turned back over the shoulder.  
Skin hangs in strips,  
the belly sac white, swollen,  
eyes still wide in their sockets.  
Small hooves, the whole a stillness  
like that of the great cave-paintings:  
flight caught at mid-point,  
the deer going on beyond its water-stripped body.  
When we walk back, the tide has covered it.

Two flickers shrill their piercing cry. They speak in soft  
phrases as the breath is sucked in and blown out. They call  
piercingly again and drum, their hard, long beaks pounding bare  
wood. They drop to the ground, dance for each other. They run  
forward and back away, leap, bow and spread their wings. Their  
spread tails flare in late sun.

Smoke from the mill puffs out,  
wind carries it far over the water.  
Song sparrows sing all day and into the night.  
At dusk, a crow carries a crab above high-tide line,  
drops it on rocks, swoops down, flies up,  
drops it, drops it—eight times.  
Plucks out the meat.

On the operating-room screen, a thin wire  
snakes up from the groin,  
twists into the right atrium,  
pulmonary artery, the right lung.  
An injection of radioactive iodine:  
quick-freeze, a sudden fire in the veins.

Sitting on a beach-log below the winter rose thicket, I hear  
surprising and varied birdcalls—liquid trills, long-drawn  
single notes, short flute melodies. Brown warbler; winter

wren; red-winged blackbird—as though someone were whistling through a leaf. Many rose hips remain, most a shiny black now, a few still red. I want to creep into this thorny thicket and sit in a little cave, as I did among briar bushes when I was a child in Texas. Under the bare stems, deep green moss grows. One bird plays the harmonica.

A moth spirals the room, touches my face,  
settles on the minute hand of the clock.  
Under that weight, the clock's hand sinks.

On TV, the worshippers of the Candomblé religion of Bahia  
sing:

Come soothing death, you save us,  
you save us from misery and pain.

They celebrate, happy, happy, they say. A religion of joy. Chickens, to be prepared for dinner, are beheaded on a stone chopping block, and the priestess pours the blood of those chickens over an old man's bald head. The chickens' feathers flutter in the air. As I do when I collect along the beach, the pluckers press feathers behind their ears. "A stone is not just a stone," they say, "it is a place where a god expresses itself, a way the god expresses itself."

Waves, deepest blue  
this evening under a smoky sky,  
move endlessly onto the beach,  
turning its pebbles.  
Shush of pebbles, of tide turning.

Frost so heavy it looks like snow, and in low places, ice fog. Creeks and channels frozen. A mallard swims madly to stir the water in a small round hole. And a mallard lies on its side, still, feet caught in solid ice.

On the news last night, a burned-out, rusted hulk, abandoned months ago by the crew, who got away in lifeboats—except for one man. Below decks, the Coast Guard found his skeleton, in ropes. They try theories: did he tie himself to the bulkhead

against the pitch of storms? Or, a prisoner, was he left behind in the panic to escape, or deliberately, as of no value, or for revenge? He didn't die by fire, they say. Long days in the bare, burned-out ship, alone, starving as the great storms twisted and jerked it, as it drifted slowly on the Japanese current.

Along the estuary trail near the flooded creek-mouth,  
swarms of yellow-jackets circled close to the ground,  
gathered in clusters on beach strawberry,  
crawled from holes the size of my finger.  
We were among them before we noticed.  
Death whirred and circled around us.  
We walked untouched.

Change shivers through me  
like wind weighted with the odor of wild currant blossom.

#### POTATO, GRANDMOTHER, & BEAR

To carry about a body like the potato's,  
I'd have to resign myself  
to dead white sorrow.  
Smooth and brown,  
no waist, no legs, no arms.  
I'd squat under an inch of soil  
or struggle in the vegetable bin.  
I'd send out pale shoots till I found  
light to green the quickest tendril.

A hand—Grandmother's hand—  
moves along, seeking the plumpest  
potato for her lunch.  
Grandmother, those who send out  
early eye stalks grow flabby.  
Even in a stew we taste  
musty, like a moldy cellar.  
Listen. Somewhere

in this dark house I hear rats.

At the ends of these stalks,  
leaves like feet begin to bud.  
I taste water  
risen at night through dark soil.  
I'm moving away into the night.

In spring, Grandmother,  
a great sow bear  
from the center of the earth claws out.

### THE COMICS

She clutched the lovely names of chemicals  
in her fist like a stiff brush,  
scrubbed everything.

She ingested no alcohol,  
used only drugs legally prescribed.  
From a tide pool off San Mateo County,

she collected specimens; an octopus  
smaller than the last bone of her thumb  
looked at her,

fastened minute suction cups  
on the skin of her fingers.  
Purple and green,

it faded to brown in formaldehyde.  
Her skin too drank that.  
As a child, on a dare, she'd swallowed

three drops of quicksilver.  
She breathed herbicides, pesticides,  
ate them as garnish, gulped smog.

Under her lowest right rib

a mound rises, smooth, fibrous, hard.  
Her skin yellows,

her eyes yellow; the blood,  
sluggish and dirty,  
backs up.

Clouds of migrating termites,  
their wings rainbows in morning light,  
drift past her windows;

through the garden's soil,  
nematodes send out their invisible threads,  
beautiful, under the lens,

as the dendritic patterns of rivers;  
in the infinite cosmos, the endless  
mutations of matter swirl;

she does not disturb them now.  
Among dandelions radiant  
with last night's fog-drizzle,

the Stellar jay, that comic  
she's loved, resplendent in blue silk,  
gobbles the poison-resistant snail.

*George Drew*

Three Poems

### MATTHEW BRADY SPEAKS

#### I: ACOUSTIC SHADOWS

I know my reputation. Ever since Antietam and my exhibit  
they hold me tightly in the dreams that wake them  
in the night; their lips are moving, thousands  
upon thousands of lips, but just as in some battles

those close by hear nothing while those far off are deafened,  
I hear nothing. Even as far away as Deer Isle, Maine,  
they remember monthly lists of the dead tacked  
to the bolted doors of their white-spined churches  
and like serpents grip me, all the rage they feel  
at the violation my photographs have done them, shattering  
the consolation of their parlors and the hard-backed pews.  
I can live with this, but that I actually liked it,  
that I hungered for it, chased it with copper plates—  
that I cannot. And that my courage in the enterprise,  
though grudgingly admired, was valor driven by ambition—  
that's even more despicable. Courage?—Jackson had courage, too,  
the kind that flared as ghastly as the Northern Lights  
over Fredericksburg, the kind that left him smoking a cigar  
and counting it a great success as he was carried from the field,  
his left sleeve flapping. Yes, old Stonewall had fire  
in his belly, and look at him—mad with his own rectitude,  
so mad he'd storm through battles like a man in love  
with death. That wasn't me. All I could ever see  
was what stared back each time I aimed at all those haunted eyes,  
those scarred and gutted faces; aimed at those who had  
been aimed at so unspeakably so many times already.  
By Jackson's ghost I swear, like the man in the black dustcoat,  
my aim was to preserve, and not just the lumpen bodies  
in a field at Fredericksburg and Shiloh, Chancellorsville,  
Antietam, Gettysburg, and all the rest: bodies that lay  
in cornrows and on ditches, limbs all twined and eyes  
as fully open as a camera greedy for the light.  
No, no! I only wished to salvage what I could,  
imprinting all those twisted and blood-covered shapes,  
both blue and gray, on plates that wouldn't die,  
thereby taking back from time the grace it always kills.  
I measured only what I saw, not what I could not hear.  
If there are any who would thank me, thank me then for this.

## 2: SHERMAN'S NECKTIES

So no one wants them now. Thousands taken by the likes of me,  
and now they paste them to their greenhouses, the sun  
sucking the images away until, like the dead themselves,  
nothing is left. Bankruptcy looms. But what of that? Franklin,

Cold Harbor, Petersburg, Bull Run—these are the deficits  
I care about. When he died, "Let us," Jackson said, "cross  
over the river and rest awhile under the trees." Tell that  
to the bones seeding the peach orchards of Georgia; tell it  
to those wrapped by the flames of the gunpowder-kindled fires  
whose terrible shrieks were borne on the evening breeze  
through the forests of The Wilderness. Tell it to them,  
not me. Glory is what they called it when they went marching  
to Manassas. Hell, that's what it was. Do what they will,  
the photographs survive, each one a grisly pose that plants  
itself in the scorched earth of our souls. Beside this,  
what is profit? Each night I dream, and in the dream,  
their dead flesh hanging from charred skeletons, the corpses  
come tramping; night after night, like Sherman's army,  
they come, twisting and bending the railroad tracks until,  
more than neckties, they are gallows from which, as far  
in any direction as the eye can see, the deep red earth  
of Georgia dangles, turning in the breeze. So let them do  
with every picture what they like. Bankruptcy's threat  
disturbs no more than would a skirmish General Lee himself  
after Pickett's charge. Like Jason and his Greeks,  
they've harvested their crop of bones. Now let them eat.

## DIRECTIONS FOR OBTAINING KNOWLEDGE OF ALL DARK THINGS

—Ahmes Papyrus

This time I beat my father. I call him,  
give him the news my ex-wife's father  
gave me just this morning, asking me  
to never tell he'd been the one who told.

He'd meant of course my father's sister,  
dead John's wife. But I forget. I tell  
my father how I heard, and naturally,  
when he calls his sister he'll tell her

he'd heard from me, which means of course  
since she hadn't called me or sent

a single word she'll ask how I'd heard.  
He'll tell her then. So I tell myself

to ask my father, when he calls tonight,  
to ask his sister, when they talk again,  
to please not say a word should she see  
my ex-wife's father. Naturally I'll forget,

and do. Between his dirty jokes and mine,  
we talk of John's slow death at sixty-two  
from cancer. He's suffered horribly these  
three years, gave one quick breath,

and died, I tell my father. So I forget.  
Soon of course my father's sister will  
see my ex-wife's father and he will know  
she knows he was the one who told,

and I'll know he knows I told her so.  
And on that note our conversation ends,  
and I hang up. Now I remember, of course,  
but when I call him back to tell him so

the line, the operator says, is dead.  
It's too late now, so I go to bed  
and think of men in tunics drawing new  
geometries in dirt. And still can't sleep.

I think of Thales, who tried to plumb  
the darkest things—those deep, deep  
distances between the stars—and fell,  
instead, flat on his face in a ditch.

There must be balance, then. Looking up  
quicken the pulse. So does looking down.  
*Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.* The Good Book  
says that, too. You must, that is, know what

your feet are doing. Archimedes died,  
forgetting. Dirt is king. And don't let

the fireworks fool you—moonshine, stars,  
the leaves' assumption of the beautiful

in autumn. Leaves quicken, leaves die.  
And John has died, his eyes the cold  
glitter of the starspecks Thales observed  
in his clear sky. It helps to be oppressed.

#### THE SCHOLAR SKUNK

On Monday night it was South Africa  
and necklaces of fire, machetes, spears;  
Ethiopia and bloated guts; on Tuesday,  
Wounded Knee and eyes like bloody bison hides;  
El Salvador and Ulster; the West Bank.

But on Wednesday it was only Troy, NY,  
a college, and the scholar skunk,  
a prince of olfactory mayhem that was not  
daring the edges of our civilization,  
wedging its head into garbage bins,  
massing its troops of little heirs apparent  
on Main Street with an innocent aplomb,  
skulking about to see what it could see  
in Lovers' Lane, and in general doing what  
it could to undo everything. Lord, no!

This critter didn't skulk at all. Rather,  
it made its way across the campus at  
exactly noon, proudly blazing a trail  
of unmistakably tart perfume not only  
through the academic quad but through  
the Science Building's catacombs as well.

What bravado! What timing! There it was,  
the end of term and all the students gone,  
leaving the cinder block and metal cells  
of Academe to the care of the custodians,  
office staff, grounds crew, and of course

to the Management—they and this VIP,

this black and white audacity; this sleek  
and pungent pedagogue of the polemical;  
this walking insurrection of the redolent;  
this pestilent post-doctorate; this striped  
semanticist of smell; this scholar, skunk!

South Africa, Ulster, Ethiopia—what's all  
of that next to this odoriferous miscreant?  
And when the Management's committee meets  
to form advisory committees that will sub-  
divide into sub-sub-committees to consider  
every angle of the situation and direct  
its representative to meet the problem nose  
to nose with buckets, mops and ammonia fumes  
slapping the air like flags, what on earth  
can prime time offer that's more critical?

So geographies aside, though it might take  
the entire term break finally to conclude,  
let the opposing camps collide! No smell  
of any kind must be allowed without a fight—  
it's a new State law. May the best beast win.

Ronald Wallace

Two Poems

#### MOTHER'S DAY PANTOUM

Your mother complains you have written  
a poem for everyone but her.

*No. That won't do. Start again:*

How do you write for your mother?

A poem, for everyone but her,  
resides in conflict, tension.

How do right by your mother

when your love for her is so un-

complicated? No conflict. No tension.  
Perhaps capture her musical laughter?  
Your love for her that is so un-  
commonly perfect, like the hereafter?

Perhaps not so musical, the laughter  
such lines generate. No one  
commonly accepts perfection; the hereafter  
is a joke; "love" an irony. Sarcasm

generates our lines. *No*, one  
cries, *that won't do! Start again!*  
*No jokes, love, no irony, no sarcasm*  
(like, your mother complains, you have written.)

#### IN THE PIANO STORE

Baldwins wall to wall.  
The tired salesman, his small  
face pinched as an eighth note,  
offers his modest help. Everything is  
restrained: the dark velour  
carpeting, the tasteful gray  
decor, the oak and pecan cabinets,  
the solid cadence of place.  
When I sit down  
at the instrument, my fingers  
do not remember the keys, my  
childhood stretched out before me  
in the ivories, the music of  
another time, another space.  
So little remains. The pain  
of practice in the unheated  
breezeway, my father's ominous  
prompting, off-key, out of tune.  
There was the moon, the basement  
rec room in which we

kissed and first danced close.  
 Who could have known this music  
 would stay on in the brain  
 well past one's capacity  
 to play it, the fingers stubbed  
 and clumsy, the hands clasped as  
 in prayer, as if the past's  
 intractable orchestra, long gone  
 on to other ensembles, could be  
 happily called back  
 for some more satisfactory coda.  
 In this dark piano store  
 the great concerto of my life  
 as if never heard before, is  
 silent, out of reach—  
 just hammers, felts, and wires,  
 the music flat between the sheets.

*Pamela Gross*

BREUGHEL'S BIRD

Mine is the only eye that sees  
 the entire landscape of suffering. Perched  
 between the lead and sulphur grip  
 of ice and sky, I hawk  
 the bad news: To the hunter, bent  
 beneath the stiffening fox, and  
 to his hounds, leashed close  
 on their master's scent; to the innkeeper's five,  
 where they stand trussed  
 to the spectacle of a singed  
 pig, its hide fairly whistling  
 under a shower of cinders, steam;  
 to the skaters, whose gaze  
 locks on the inch or so beyond  
 the blade's knifehold;  
 to figures small as flake of ash, black

and wind-whipped like ash, swirling  
 toward the chimney-fire's rash  
 bloom; and to the rows of snow-wimpled  
 houses, and the careless jumble  
 of seedy cousins, feeding  
 nearby, pinned  
 by avarice or need to a scatter  
 of crumbs. All fits  
 and rises, all mindless  
 of an old door, upslung, its broken jaw  
 propped and leering  
 above them. Warned  
 is not saved. There is some good reason  
 we stay captive  
 to the private view: Accept  
 the foot's preoccupation with  
 its next step, and the body's whole devotion  
 to the sound of the footstep in snow; a sound  
 which—for all it resembles a grinding  
 of tooth against bone, or the rope's  
 complaint against the sprung weight—  
 might be innocent.

*David Biespiel*

Two Poems

THE IDEA OF WHAT'S HERE

The idea of what's here: the many  
 Footpaths crossing and round stones made by water,  
 Small and ordinary, suddenly-lighted-  
 Then-shadowed, suddenly picked up and thumbed

Into a pocket, or thrown over the ledge  
 And the tops of pines to lie on the rim  
 Of a long path's stillness, the many there,  
 By the river, gathering, the water slow.

Or the soft and reddened rain-dampened twigs,

Or the entire trunk fallen,  
From lightning, or age, or hail's  
Great winds that break summer's back to a point.

If you could see this path and the river  
Turn out of sight, the small sticks breaking up  
In the backwater, would you remember  
A particular blue day, in spring?

Would the mast of that daylight's sail strain  
Above the moment you bit your lip  
To remember? The way I bit mine the moment  
My father said he was leaving us,

When we sat in the front lawn, under the pines,  
And the air cracked, and I listened.  
Even now when the sky's folded to black  
And the clouds are white and moving fast,

When the wind and the leaves are one sound  
And I've already slid out of bed, but paused  
To kiss my wife on her cheek, and pulled up  
The sheet, and pulled back a bunch of her hair

To hear the slow breath her singing body makes,  
I am that boy again the night my father's left us,  
Walking to the roses and cutting off one bloom,  
Walking to the pines to break the needles.

Or I am not that boy, and the idea  
Has faded into the footmarks, ordinary  
And small as it is. What's here:  
An open window, wind on the cheek

Of a single leaf blown four stories high,  
Then higher, then out of view.  
Behind me a turning, the full breaths  
Moving in and out, through the every-night.

## AT TWENTY-EIGHT THOUSAND FEET

What you can't see of the earth's cut and paste—  
A river's needle line, lines of trees greening,  
The roadway lanes in composition without motive,  
All the buses let out by a bell—is nothing  
Compared to these white islands of clouds  
Burning to distraction. Both are anonymous.  
If you could see to whatever point in the sky  
You wanted to name—as if you could be there  
Waiting, anything you thought you were,  
That is a thing, like a meditation, a child  
Would see as a lap, climb there,  
And lay the head to rest.  
The word that comes to mind is *volcanic*.  
The word you speak is something different,  
A spray of breath vanishing in the sky's blue streaks:  
*Infinitesimal*. Those explosions  
Are an earlier mist, sparks the color of ash,  
Nothing you could touch, the airplane  
Descending like a submarine. What sleep you feel,  
Laying the head back, what shapes you fall into,  
Whitecap or mountain, resemble swimming in a bay  
At morning, mist rimming the beach  
And horizon, and hung overhead like a hood  
For the body of water—the waves inverted,  
Easy to swallow—the blue in the sky brushstroke  
When you swim to the buoys, float,  
Measure your body halfway under, halfway  
Above, trusting the clouds steaming will flame out  
By noon, piece by piece, in the actual sky.

Gloria Boyer

CANE TOAD WARS

"Toads that grow to the size  
of dinner plates are invading  
Brisbane, one of Australia's  
largest cities."

—The Idaho Statesman

Earth globules, bog farmers,  
we are excellent survivors.  
The rattle of plastic amuses us.  
They plan to bag us, send us to freezers,  
stripped and ridiculous as chickens.

But we are the wet grass fabulists—  
we are fit, we have Darwin's blessing!  
Look out, old disaster bag!  
It's the master of dogs,  
you rag-infested flesh monkey!

There is no end to their devices.  
Cartilage harvesters, they sprinkle  
death tide on our pebbled skin.  
Their machines mow us to cracked  
plasters on asphalt.

Their young surpass them in cruelty:  
devils with terrible rubber feet.  
And where are the beetles we devoured  
with such pleasure? Now we make do  
with dog food and slugs under pale roses.

Our mates call across a flat night  
beneath the moon's empty den.  
Thugs of the underground bunkhouse,  
we sleep on these stone pillows.  
We dream of the rattling cane.

Janet Holmes

THE DOG SEASON

Mornings, the road in front of my house  
trembles with runoff—last week's rains  
working down from the mountains late, still in their party satins,  
making for the river, one street and one field away;

and in the tiny arroyo that results, the soft clay-edged runnel,  
many birds, ten or eleven, fuss at bathing. A mist  
shaken from wings clouds their chattering not-yet-song  
of specific pleasure. My dog

will jump the fence these days for anything: fragrance of horse;  
the mile-away yowl of a cat, or an imagined cat; he wends back  
through Rivera's fields until he is decorated—  
belly, paws, and ears—with seed-pods, their rasp and nap  
tenacious, delicate. He sows all Nambé with new weeds, drinks  
from the irrigation ditch, and finally, on Luisito's porch  
with Luis in his wheelchair (as if they had been gossiping  
all afternoon like two old men), politely  
waits for me to come home.

Then runs with me. I bicycle along the flooded river, where  
cottonwoods  
shed white tufts of the stuff they're named for  
and from where the sunset is radiant with clichés. . . .  
Everything says, *Early summer, end of spring.*  
The ridiculous baby goats, all bleat and stumble.  
Somebody's tilled garden. Where was my own

glad rush into the season? At twilight  
next to the Rio Nambé I could inhale it:  
steaming mud and newborns, the yellowish  
new green leaves, the dance  
of canine impatience. *How often*, he asks,  
*must your nose be rubbed in the evidence?*

## MISSOULA, MONTANA

It may well be the first day of spring.  
 Two weeks since the equinox.  
 One month since the robins have come back hungry  
 This morning I am watching a woman and her young son  
 out on the sidewalk  
 picking worms up off the wet pavement,  
 tossing them back into the grass,  
 which is greening now, here and there.  
 The boy is still squeamish,  
 mostly scouting it out ahead and gesturing down at his shoes,  
 then stepping back,  
 waiting for her to catch up,  
 to dangle one over a finger  
 like a wet shoelace,  
 causing him to scream and wiggle his whole body,  
 to wring his small hands.  
 For a half block or so  
 they're at it like this,  
 then they start on the gutters.  
 At one point a man comes out of his house,  
 stands with his hands in his pockets,  
 grinning, doing his part  
 by standing in the grass, out of the way.  
 And when the boy works his way down to the man  
 he explains what they are doing,  
 pointing all around his feet again,  
 doing his flailing, worm-in-the-air imitation.  
 The man nods,  
 says something like:  
*Good for the grass, you know, worms,  
 they eat dirt.*  
 Squinting,  
 he looks up at the sky  
 which is a harder blue than yesterday,  
 walks back into his house.  
 When the two finish their work

they get into a red truck  
 drive on.  
 They talk about how the worms are gobbling their way back home,  
 how the worms discuss their rescue  
 with their mouths full,  
 how the dandelions are conspiring a comeback,  
 along with the bitterroot,  
 the hemlock,  
 the cedar and the fir,  
 all in the man's front yard.

## PASTORAL

Let the roadside go to chicory  
 and gall-  
 of-the-earth, and the hillside go  
 to clover  
 and everlasting  
 pea, and the road itself  
 to the barred belly of the blacksnake  
 and the tarot belly  
 of the tortoise,  
 while burdock and poke  
 choke the corn  
 out of the fields,  
 and morning glories run wild  
 over the immaculate gardens—  
 let thistle grow tall  
 and defiantly purple.  
 And let there be no noise,  
 just the pileated woodpecker  
 screeching  
 like a wild monkey,  
 heat,  
 and the wind stumbling through a long row of pines,  
 the unabashed turning  
 of leaves  
 asking  
 the wind's *blessings, blessings, blessings.*

*Colette Inez*

OHIO LETTERS

Dear S.,

On my cutting board, tomato quarters  
resemble the torn off ears  
of an Aztec spirit.  
The malevolent Tomatl.  
I can't appease him with song.  
Having yielded my voice  
to the god of sore throats,  
I'll offer him cheese,  
gold as the jeweled pectorals  
of a nobleman.

My meal, an open-face grilled cheddar  
and tomato to devour alone  
where the Lords of Ohio  
whet their knives  
for the sacrifice of the maidens.  
On the south green  
they scream as if it were time  
for virgins to leap  
into the hubbub of promises  
for perpetual life.

My hunger for home rumbles like a summer storm.  
I write you words, notes, poems, curved,  
pressed hard against the page.

Dear S.

It's past the start of my tenure on a mountain  
that holds small towns like a sow  
nursing its litter.  
West of Parkersburg, east of Chillicothe,  
among wind and water gaps,

here I am in the Appalachian ranges,  
and I dislike mountains,  
stacked earth at the end of town streets.

Selling pressed dates on camel back, your ancestors  
roved through deserts, mine foraged through plains.  
You ask for my dream: a singer finds her voice  
perched like a bird in the sycamore.

What does it mean? Tomatl lurks  
on the outskirts of town,  
readies his troops to clash against foes  
in the roar of the stadium.  
Silence is the penalty for loss.

O Dear S.,

Again I wake without you  
and the air is sharp with memory,  
the gentle routines of a seasoned pair.  
In a tangle of purple berries and spiraling leaves  
corn light fades into clouds  
out of reach.

Peering up at constellations, I stumble past trees  
that vault towards heaven's mountain.  
My body wants to nourish poems at each teat  
like a dazed pig, one eye half-opened,  
wary as a blood-shot moon skulking out of her pen  
behind the watchful mountain.

Faithfully, C.

STORM

Snowsuted, sitting perfectly still  
 puffed up like a ptarmigan,  
 you gather with your eyes each  
 wind—  
 ribbed drift, milkweed pod, foxtail,  
 broken stem  
 of pampas  
 grass, star-spiked shadow, and pine clump  
 strewn by the storm last night  
 sweeping  
 from the mountains to the sea,  
 cold  
 wind twisting the apple tree outside  
 the room where you  
 lay motionless  
 in my arms for days, too listless  
 to lift your head to drink  
 until the wind  
 knocked wires down, bowed our fence,  
 and your fever broke, releasing  
 us to sit, quelled, in the silent  
 after—  
 storm, tipsy with delight  
 at every icy  
 twig, reaching towards the shiny  
 red  
 branch pointing up at the sun, tarnished  
 silver in the smoke-bundled sky  
 and suddenly  
 you commando crawl away from me,  
 grinning, rolling on your back,

flailing,  
 sweeping the new green grass clean,  
 kicking  
 wafts of powder  
 up, stirring  
 the effervescent, unstoppable,  
 churning  
 flurry of which you are the center,  
 as the sun lifts from the mist,  
 burnished  
 by strips of fog, you  
 kneel on your  
 wing-marked ground, wave one  
 fist, press the snow—  
 gritty melt of garden dirt and  
 crumbled leaves—  
 into your mouth, laughing,  
 offering me some, too.

KANTISHNA TERNS

Arched bodies hovered  
 over us, wings  
 beating,  
 soapstone bellies  
 shining, scissortails opening  
 and closing,  
 snapping shut,  
 slicing our fire's smoke.  
 Sharp, white sticks poised midair.  
 Their whistles rasped.  
 We hesitated,  
 afraid of hidden nests.  
 The zippers on our sleeping bags  
 joined together,  
 one big bag for both of us—  
 the smell of oil cloth and paraffin.  
 "Will you?" you asked. I said  
 I was too tired to know, but secretly

I asked, *Forever? What is that?*  
All night I heard the sounds  
I'd heard all day—  
water meeting wood, water  
washing dirt,  
shore-rushed, rain-roughened river  
now whirling in pools, now  
smoothing  
reflecting light  
the way scrub willows mirror  
wind, streaks  
of silver quickly moving through,  
then passing on.  
The snags we saw!  
Whole trees, some of them.  
Each one thrashing  
the surface, hooked  
to unseen anchors,  
struggling. I watched  
one branch break free of rock  
and begin  
to float downstream.

*Jennifer Snyder*

Two Poems

TINY BUDDHAS

i.  
The snail  
can live  
with the gaudy table.  
It can  
  
live  
in its easy way  
with easing across  
the yellow expanse.  
To it

peace is easy.  
Peace is the pouch  
of water,  
a country the size  
of a palm,

on the table.

ii.  
There is a formulation  
of the lizard:  
under the dizzying sun  
inchflies come  
to rest under leaves.  
The sneak of the lizard.  
Quick tongue.  
The sweet, crunchy  
taste of inchfly.

All this is done  
with quiet lizard respect.

The puff of the lizard's throat  
is a tiny  
unoffending prayer.

iii.  
Blowfish:  
serious laborer.  
She spends the afternoon

going to the bay's other end  
where warm stale water  
bends into the shore.

Dignity from the eyes  
of a blowfish:

the mastery of her  
awkward body,

the love of her bloated self.

She is a bloated  
mobile sun with this mission.

iv.

The common cockroach  
is neither crawler  
nor flier,  
Somewhere between.

Its tiny legs  
and antennas  
are coordinated  
without fault.

Its thoughts  
are quick, rare

equations—  
the dimensions of floors,  
of trashcans.

In this  
the cockroach is beautiful—

its life is a moment  
of truth and legs,  
a multiplicity  
of delicious fates.

v.

There are tiny  
buddhas.  
We will call them  
O.

Love them enough  
to touch them—

the cockroach loves touch.  
His black wings are sensitive.

You are a blowfish too.

O

learn dignity  
by praising the ugliest  
parts of your body—  
elbow stub, blowfish belly,  
unclean ear.

O

pray as often  
as quietly  
as the lizard.

O

there is peace.  
Think like the snail.

Calculate your life  
as if you were easing  
down the leg  
of yellow table.

#### THE BIRD MAN

In the cowy  
lung of summer  
he fed all 300

by hand—his house was  
ending in every  
way . . . no

bucks left and white lilies  
tilted over  
keeping inside them

fragile pouches  
of water.  
Once inside the house

ruckus came  
from every angle. Often  
the bird whose eyes were

particularly stagnant  
stood, so to keep  
its body from going out

of its body,  
on its left leg.  
At twilight

the August sun put  
holes through the air  
and the birds stayed

stiffly up,  
calling in,  
a strange roar eroding

walls, the bland  
tall planks  
of summer.

*Jeff Worley*

Two Poems

#### LATE SUMMER: A LOOK AT THE GARDEN

Next to the compost bin I find a possum.  
I give the corpulent body a soft kick  
and it rights itself, waddles into spirea  
and thistle, this indignant god

of garbage and revival, its pink tail

disappearing like a grin. The garden  
pushed out its last green flag months ago,  
and I am home late from the office,

trying to reason with that part of myself  
that says I am day by day more discontent.  
I bend and see that blight has taken  
the cucumbers, cancer spiraling deep

into the white flesh. . . . Who have I  
made easier today by anything I've said?  
Who have I nudged even further into the past?  
I see none of the poison I've sent down

to the mole has mattered—he's still mining  
the green beans—and the Japanese beetles  
stop feasting just long enough to copulate  
on a corn tassel. . . . Today, I talked

on the phone, led a stray participle to its  
rightful noun and took my check to the bank.  
The garden is giving itself up, and a day  
will come soon when none of this will matter.

I snap the cucumbers from their stalks  
and toss them in the weeds, discover  
a plump strawberry the earwigs and aphids  
have somehow missed. It's good as gone.

#### HUNGER

I sit in the lawn chair reading *Scientific American*,  
another black hole discovered out beyond the borders

of the known. It's eating stars. It's ravenous for space.  
It's collecting the first splinters of light our sun sent out.

Then I'm distracted by an orange striped cat bouncing from  
the thicket we've let go to seed. The cat has a tiny rabbit

in its teeth, so I scream, *Drop it! or Hey! or Goddamnit!*—  
something to make him lose his grip on the speckled ball

no larger than a wren or a baby's fist. But he waves  
it at me like a dirty rag, it bleats its terrified bleat,

and they disappear back into the thicket. I will rescue it  
because all my life I've wanted to save something from dying:

the thick spirea and blackthorn ransack my shirt, but  
I keep wading into them. The hop sedge and holly, poison

sumac and spiny thistle shred my cut-offs and then strip me  
bare, but I keep going. Down my back the bloody calligraphy

of rose thorns and witch hazel—the bleating just ahead now—  
until everything grows still; it's dark; night with no moon.

I stand in a clearing, the gnarled trees a thousand times taller  
than a man. Somewhere up in the thick branches an orange cat—

big as a moon, terrifying as an insatiable universe—crouches.

*Melody Davis*

Two Poems

#### CIELO

The Dominican ladies have it right—  
*mi cielo*, my sky, they name their love.

Ah, *my cielo*, and everything else  
in the world settles in place.

Oh ceiling, I'm your floor.

Together we make a room,  
a little room bounded by light.

What light the walls of our arms  
hold in. Did you know that skin  
can blind? Over and over I'm struck,

and falling I take the earth so you,  
Papa, can have a place to earn your name.  
*Papa, mi Papa*, do you cover me or I, you?

Who can tell in all this encircling  
whether we move or stay still?

We'll cradle each other, sky and earth,  
roof and place,

if you do not manage to bury me  
and I do not manage to burn you down.

#### BLESSING

It happens simply,  
a slice of bread,  
the fact that you have butter  
to put on it,

the fact that though we could  
we haven't yet blown up the planet,  
the bowl of borscht called evening,  
permission of green.

It comes across the dry hills  
and parking lots, unexpected,  
and sits at your table,  
and you feel unworthy to feed it but do.

To have so much—*here*, you say,  
*take back the ten thousand pleasures*  
*I never deserved. I've lost that frantic bird*  
*in the rib cage.*

*I barely remember—was I ever a child?*  
*Was I really small enough to think I would burst?*  
After your life had become an abandoned house  
your body kept trying to live in,

gratitude comes,

and your eyes and hands begin to touch  
what lies before you gently solid—  
nails, hair, wood, stone, doors, skin, fruit,

horizons that peel away,  
the child you were, tortured with expectation,  
all the pure things you do not miss,  
a breeze that long ago rustled

your classroom and finally caught up  
with you again among the simple facts,  
such as how haters say don't don't don't  
while everyone does.

*Joanie Mackowski*      Three Poems

#### THE CLEANING

Violated, imagine, a world so mild and soundless,  
where orange angels drift

sideways, zebras ascend, light sends warmth  
from a bulb, and no territory harbors

predators. Yet I saw  
hands reach in. Of course, here are partisan

schools and factions, minuscule tooth marks  
in a chiffon veil, small tetras

striped like Italian flags, muscular bullets,  
moving in a wall to match the blackchin mouthbrooder,

massive, neon, and with human cheeks. The medium  
is liquid, the hierarchy rigid: Jack Dempsey

is ugly but awed, the kissers kiss only themselves,  
cardinals glide upward, and some fish do not move

at all. They hang like paintings or paisley  
on wallpaper, deeply conscious of being

waiting-room decoration. A bleeding heart lurks  
outside the little green pagoda. Outside their case,

diaphanous grace contracts to crushed petals, and inside  
they appear drugged, in a tropical way,

until they dart  
from behind the pagoda toward the crumb that mingles

with substitute sky, and staring an instant  
beyond the crumb, they see ripples and feel

the peculiar difference between their world  
and ours, how air cuts ridges on the water, seems even

to draw water off the lips. The air  
of the psychiatrist's waiting room

does not agree with the fish.  
They sense in it a preoccupation with interiors,

and the fish have worked millennia  
for their brilliant exteriors. Some person waiting

may try to lock eyes with one, say  
with the empathetic blushing angel fish,

nose to nose, but the angel's flat face  
disappears like an image on a screen. Eyeing

it one-eyed, however, one may bathe  
in its unblinking, guardian sight, askance,

frank and swirling with wings and reflectors,  
and here the waiting person finds her own element.

Was it a violation at all? Not one fish was netted, but  
the environment shrank to a desperate

low. Siphoned upward, water exacted mean  
margins, and the fishes' lidless

eyes widened (although they can't),  
harrowed in the narrowing

strait between us and  
them. Professionals scooped

out the terra-cotta  
gravel and rinsed it

in a pail. Each plastic foxtail,  
fern, hortwort, and some that looked

like shaving brushes was uprooted  
and cleaned, one gloved hand

sponged. Barbs  
jabbed, black moors

sunk to despondency, angels  
pressed flat against the wall.

Then, from buckets, for minutes, fresh  
water poured, and the world's lip rose

back to normal. A slow-moving, dream-paced  
avalanche of gravel released

an effervescence that rivaled the iridescence  
of scales. The hand, contemplatively,

rerooted plastics, returned the green pagoda  
to its corner, and the fish circled in lovely

agitation, more like joy, in the larger body,  
reconstituted to their glass house, glass

good for reflection and good  
for sucking whatever palatable thing may grow.

#### THE RECEPTION

*There are occasions when this vision of the world  
takes us by surprise, the mind having slipped un-  
consciously into a receptive attitude. It is like  
the oft-recurring tale of coming upon an  
unexpected door in a familiar wall. . . .*

—A. W. Watts

A bulging black eye cursed the living room:  
woodchip brown, flinging soot, a wren!  
It thrashed like a scissors, had tumbled  
scratching down the knuckled metal chimney  
and was trapped behind glass in the wood-burning stove.

Its angry eye seemed to recognize  
its mistake: a sofa, a rocker, an oriental carpet,  
*The Audubon Society Field Guide to N.A. Birds*,  
where it is written:

"The wren often nests in odd places,  
such as mailboxes, flower pots,  
and even the pockets of coats on clotheslines."

I was afraid. Its gestures were savage,  
its wings tore jaw-like,  
it burned in the quiet stove.  
I knew I could not trap it,  
neither could I let it die like an ember.  
It flew in my head, flew

from the pages I read.

Wren, animal heart, beating to flee  
a passive mind. This house and its glass  
are a trap; not reading, I'll look  
for hours, my eyes white as a movie screen,  
dissolving myself into seen,  
and "nature never returns the stare."  
But I look up, suddenly, and there you are,  
looking—hatefully—at me.

So I opened all the doors and all the windows  
before opening the little glass door of the stove,  
and the wren shot out unthinkingly  
through the closest door.  
The abundance of doors was overdone:  
the day received the wren named and unknown.

#### THROUGH THE RAVINE

Cedars curve like the ribs of arch vaults:  
the path through the ravine bordered by moss  
leads inward for some;  
topmost leaves diffuse the light,  
ferns unfold like prayer,  
and this sanctuary, dwarfing the walker in vegetable domes,  
decomposes our trespasses in rich red mud.  
But some, rocks in our pockets  
and dragging sticks long as the path is wide,  
are crusaders for peace,  
looking for invisible beer drinkers  
who scattered the empty cans,  
for the bicyclists who are Hercules  
changing the course of the little stream  
with the prints of their tires.  
They are inappropriate.  
I feel the enemy within.

Today yells reached me a quarter mile away,

sliding strangely in and out of the maples and the moss:  
this walk could be my last, I thought,  
liberated from matter during my daily meditation.  
Then I saw: men and women, uniformed  
and marching in pale light, pushups in the creek in the cold,  
blotched with mud, shivering, chanting  
yessir yessir yessir.  
They cheered each other on,  
danced the dance where fear is the music.  
I supposed they were practicing for something.  
I forgot to ask who was in charge.  
Their cries unfolded like leaves,  
and war hung like an odor in the park.

So I left. Climbed out of the ravine  
and into the picnic area,  
where the shouts backdropped  
a little girl's birthday party:  
red bouncing ball, hamburger smell,  
ribbons, giggles, and distant grunts.  
Two women stood at the edge of the trees  
and watched through a clearing  
the drills below, and I joined them.  
One was blond and had a hairless dog that ate grass,  
the other wore a red coat and a small drop  
hung from the tip of her nose.  
We shared our contempt, confessed  
the rocks in our pockets,  
the murder we'd consider to defend our peace.

We talked of piano wire, of loosely covered holes,  
of the inappropriateness of war for a little girls' party:  
we were frumpy gods on the wall of Troy,  
and the fate we decided was undramatic.  
The fake soldiers marched away even as we spoke,  
without our noticing.  
Then the silent park bounced back to holiness,  
the little girls didn't change.  
The hairless dog vomited a white dollop  
and relieved, or emptied, we went three separate ways.

## BANGALORE

It may come to this: all controls break down at once,  
and I meet you head-on, finally, each on separate flights,  
and in the moment before the crash, you say,  
"Tell me everything," what would you really like:

current events? I sleep in different cities every night,  
sharing hotel lobbies with other airport souls—  
Baghdad, Delhi, Dallas—pictures in a skull, a fragile bowl  
of water. I have held yours in my hands,  
not caring where you came from.

Or history. Miss Crustacean five years running,  
a shot of her holding, correctly, a snapping arthropod,  
just out of reach of petty injury, as she lowers him,  
inch by screaming inch, into the pot.

Further back, the Hopscotch Queen performs in the dirt  
behind the general store. There are moments  
when both feet are off the ground. They want it  
to last forever. And it does.

Now, the Escape Artist: persons with problems  
twisted as colored hemp truss her with knots  
of just complaint. Obsessed with her own flexible  
timing, she squirms out nightly, bubbling to the surface.  
Stunned amazement. Applause.

I'm tired of all these stories except one:

Ten years I've slept with  
lepers outside the flower show.  
They are no worse than you, no better.  
For a rupee, I'm allowed to wander  
freely among protected trees.  
Around me, the noisy streets

and people of a town,  
its Christian missions, ashrams.  
I am guided through the gates,  
walked through beds  
of xanthomosa, uvularia, jade,  
white and carmine roses  
forced to bloom.

It's getting late. You'll want the truth—we are never alone.  
Look down; they were waving their limbs at us all along, laughing  
at these little, circling machines.

## A SUMMER NIGHT

—From an account of a Viking funeral  
by Ibn Fadlan, envoy from Baghdad,  
922 A.D.

*They asked the girls, "Who will die  
with him?" One of them answered, "I,"*

and imagines herself  
falling: a leaf  
across the body, his huge  
floating bed packed  
with dogs,  
daggers, cloth of gold—  
everything needed to  
mingle with gods—

*The hag admonished her to drain the cup without  
lingering, to enter the tent where her master lay.*

recalling how, at ten, she  
crept to the door  
of the woman—  
a creature of castoff  
skins, talismans,  
and the yellowed teeth

of a bear—and said,  
“Make me someone.”

*Large wooden figures stood on the shore  
in the semblance of human beings.*

Look at them:  
old merchants, royal sons,  
her own stupid kin  
standing in the mud of the  
great river Volga,  
shrinking from the hand  
she has held since  
childhood.

Look at them  
hobbled in marsh-grass.

*Placing her feet on the extended hands of the men,  
she was raised up high, saying, “Finally.”*

So many nights like this: perched  
on the slippery rocks,  
“the way the very sun  
itself,” she thinks,  
“rides on the plain,  
then at dawn, unable to  
sleep, sails its half-circle  
of summer.”

*It seemed she was ready to enter the tent, when  
the hag seized her by the hair and dragged her in.  
Six men followed.*

The first is close to her ear:  
“Tell thy master,”  
forcing her down beside  
the corpse, dark head  
shutting out the sun  
beyond her tentflap.

“Remind him of fear.”

*Men began to beat upon their shields, to drown  
her outcries, which might have deterred  
other girls.*

He rises, soon replaced  
by the next rough cousin,  
stripped and mourning.

All the while, the nurse  
holds her to the ground,  
saying no:  
“Not fear. Show him  
anger.”

*The dead man's next of kin now drew near, and taking  
a torch, walked backwards toward the pyre.*

Which is it?

Someone close is  
screaming  
and she can't think,  
only wrestle  
with the witch alone,  
who even now  
ropes her.

*A terrible storm began to blow up,  
gave wings to the blaze.*

Not fear, (crawling  
toward the body)  
not anger finally—  
just belief  
that the one who shared  
her bed, removed  
fishbones, is now intent  
on testing the blade,  
humming something from  
childhood.

## About Our Contributors

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*Poetry Northwest* is in its thirty-second 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.

For the sake of our bookkeeping, if you are making a contribution to the magazine and at the same time are renewing your subscription or subscribing for the first time, would you please make out separate checks? Thank you.

David Wagoner  
Editor

