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Poetry
NORTHWEST



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POETRY NORTHWEST

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POETRY NORTHWEST

WINTER 1995-96

Sharon Fain

Three Poems

A BIRTH

6:31 P.M., SOUTHEAST CORNER OF McALLISTER AND POLK:

*A homeless reportee found a bloody, one-hour-old infant
...He took the newborn to...a fire alarm box [pulling
the lever] for help. Police located the possible scene of
childbirth...and followed a blood trail...finding the baby's
mother, who was homeless, lying in some bushes.
The suspect was booked.*

— The City Voice Police Blotter

In front of City Hall, a block from the Board of Health,
just after rush hour, before the sun had set,
at the spot where the number five bus
picks up passengers every ten minutes,
down the street from the federal building,
across the plaza from the library,
above the underground parking lot,
long before fog drenched the bushes,

two blocks from Symphony Hall where Ozawa
was expected to arrive at any minute,
not far from the retro-fitted freeway,
at the hour when waitresses were lighting candles

Are You Moving?

If you wish to continue receiving your subscription copies
of POETRY NORTHWEST, be sure to notify this office in advance.
Send both your old address and new—and the ZIP Code numbers.

and lights in apartment towers flickered on,
six miles from the San Andreas Fault,
four miles from an ocean, near the end of the century,
on the other side of the globe from Bethlehem.

ISLA MUJERES: WEEKS BEFORE THE BREAKDOWN

When electricity failed and the full moon
spilled into that restaurant gilding
patio tiles and wine glasses, throwing
shawls of light across our bodies
and the musicians from the Andes
kept on playing and the locals came out
of their houses to listen, did you know
that a numb part of me had already risen
into white air, was floating
above chimneys and phone wires,
concrete rubble heaped on the seawall,
above the bleached skin of the Caribbean,
above reefs, islands, whole continents,
the planet in its envelope of breath.
When the drummer in the red camisa
threw back his shoulders with a sort of moan
and the others stomped their feet,
coaxed dreams from those mountain flutes,
did you hear me whisper *I might make it.*
Tonight might last forever.

ON SEEING THE PLACE WHERE I FIRST MADE LOVE

It all looks so narrow now, the house,
brick sidewalk buckled over maple roots,
Marlborough Street, a strip of pewter sky

wedged in above, everything unchanged
since nineteen sixty except for scale.
That, and the play of light.

Once endless, sun-lit, sky and street
outside the front bay window.
It was June. Magnolia petals, soft

and wet as sleep, heaped on the bricks.
Magnolias cupped erect on branches.
We would lean out and touch them.

Skin, rose-red folds of the body,
bones and moving veins beneath.
We memorized each other

and knowledge led to a promise
that, by its very nature, failed.
But we left that house believing.

Herbert Scott

Three Poems

TO DEATH, FOR MY FATHER

Death, this man
is dancing. See
how you can't see
his moves, so quick
his feints confuse,
counter your low
illicit hay-maker
harvesting air, nothing,
which makes you
appear foolish
as he bends double
with sputtering laughter,
and you swing
again, over his head,
losing balance, falling,
surprised at his face
twisted above you, counting.

THE MOST TERRIBLE AND BEAUTIFUL THING

The earth opening, bodies startled
from their graves, lungs like butterflies.
Hearts like matches striking

catch, take hold, not all
at once, but each in its own dark time.
"Is this the moment we were promised?"

They touch each other like the blind.
The past is future, the future closed
forever in the past. Each thing returns

to its beginnings, crops to the fields, pasture
to woods, rivers clear to pure thin tongues.
Machines are put to sleep like toothless dogs.

The assassin sips his breakfast coffee
robbed of purpose. Rain climbs
the morning sky. At first, a blessing,

the dead in the arms of their loved ones.
And yet, these poor souls, how mystified
and fierce to see their lives erased,

to know the certain term of infancy,
the seed unspent as fathers steal them
from their earthly home.

How bitter is that death called birth
as our brief time begins, is spent,
and God will not relent.

THE SONG THE GROCER SINGS

We have come up short.
The shelves are half-empty.
The registers won't check out.

We have figures to show
what comes in has gone out
but someone neglected to pay.

A father is fumbling his pants.
A mother is pregnant with goods.

Fat rustles our bones, stealing
over muscle like a white shadow.

The barter for groceries is not
appetite, or flesh
sweetened by need, or the love

of breath. It is cash
in the till, and we are short.

Someone is eating our lives.
Someone is going to pay.

ANOTHER TIME

I was delivering my daughter
to college. Everything
eighteen years can gather
was the dragging weight

of the U-Haul. For ten hours
she slept, curled
away from me, her buttocks
up against the shaft.

Was she gearing up for some
reckless future? What was
I thinking! Along the way
there are places

that beckon us to stop, or warn—
last chance! When I knew
my mother was dying,
when I saw her shriveling

around a hardness
that ached to be revealed,
we talked about everything
unimportant. It was easy—

two routes falling
west and south to empty out
in Atlanta. The next day
I moved her in. I did what

mothers do. It was work.
Hard work. Sometimes
the body is the only
way we have.

SIX WAYS TO HIDE

Eat yourself
into a greatcoat
of sleepy flesh.
Who would think
to look for you
inside yourself?

Be porcupine-ish.
Wake to write
dour lines in the dark.
No one will bother you

in a penthouse
with a broken elevator,
a perch on Everest.
Fly off

to an early retirement.
Hurl spit, shake
yourself hard
and shoot back
like a bad monkey.

Lose yourself
in a fifth.

Or be as genteel
as the chameleon.
Nod and smile
from the leaf of a chair;
agree to disappear.

LETTER TO SUVORIN

—Anton Chekhov, Sakhalin Island, off the coast of Siberia

—July 11, 1890

Greetings, friend, from the world's end! You were right,
the tea is terrible! We are moored at last off Sakhalin Island.
Because there's no true harbor we'll sleep on board tonight,

cross the bay of reefs by daylight.
Six thousand miles of floods, thieves, mud, mud and tedium
between me and home—I almost understand

why you think this place can never concern us.
On shore, forest fires march down the mountains —
perhaps these flames are eternal, no one in the village

tries to put them out. On deck, the same numbed peace:
women and children, soldiers and manacled convicts
huddle together and try to sleep.

—But even here the weeks pass. It's August now.
I woke at 5 this morning as I do each day to bells
from St. Vladimir's squat log cabin of a church.

Since the convicts are forbidden entrance, I, too, stay clear.
I pulled on two pairs of pants for warmth, smoked my pipe
watching the Tartar Straits sunrise, then worked till dark.

I've decided to interview every person on the island.
You say these lifers hold no interest,
but on the contrary, I can't stop thinking of them.

This morning I met Mikhail, a man chained
to a wheelbarrow for two years. Like so many others,
but with a four-year-old daughter, Anna,

who's always at his side, even sleeps in his barrow.
And thin Lydia, a twelve-year-old who answered all my questions,
then asked could I afford a whole rouble to lie with her?

I forced myself last week to watch a whipping.
A doctor like myself examined the man they meant to break,
pronounced him fit for ninety lashes.

The flogger dealt five blows from the left, five from the right,
impassive as a teacher belting a child.
It's not the same, I know, but I kept seeing my father,

how he'd lift the cane above his head, reaching for more force.
I was five. He made me kiss the rod that taught me justice.
I fled the guardhouse. The convict's cries followed me

down wood sidewalks. In one yard I saw a rooster
tied by its leg,
in another a lock and chain around a pig's neck—
I swear, everything on this island's bolted down.

I climbed to the lighthouse, my favorite spot,
spray breaking over rocks named The Three Murderers,
and along the cliff line the windblown fires

have their own grandeur. What do you think,
is even hell beautiful? Last night, beneath Bengal lanterns
and fireworks, I dine with Sakhalin's governor

high above the village. The governor spoke
on "the golden age of prison care."
My own speech, on building the island's first school,

disappeared in polite applause. A warden
who'd drunk too much French champagne told of hanging
nine men for a single crime. He said *there was an*
entire bouquet

hanging in the air, but when the bodies were lifted down

the doctor found one still alive. Some nights,
since he hanged the man a second time, the warden can't sleep.

How I long to leave this island!
Alexey, when I see you next in Petersburg
we will have tea and jam on a silver tray

—how absurdly happy I felt just now, writing that!
Imagine, candlelight on thick preserves, raspberry or gooseberry,
and everything terrible in life again going on out of sight.

Listen, friend, I need you. Tell me how to remain happy
while others suffer, how, in conscience, to savor good tea again,
how to give thanks for the taste of gooseberries.

*Note—"Letter to Suvorin": This letter is an invention that draws on Anton Chekhov's
The Island of Sakhalin, a letter to his sister, and several biographies. Alexey Suvorin,
Chekhov's friend and publisher, opposed Chekhov's trip to study conditions on the
Siberian penal island and refused in advance to publish any book Chekhov wrote on
Sakhalin.*

GOOSEBERRIES

For the first time in weeks, staying up all night on
suicide watch,
I find I'm happy. My job is to pay attention,
which I can do listening to Coltrane on the radio, quietly

so as not to wake Luke, the nine-year-old just an arm's
length away.
I scan his homemade quilt for movement, recalling the
girl who years ago
sliced her wrist with a thumb tack while the nurse by her bedside

watched but couldn't see. I'm grateful for a few hours to read,
a story by Chekhov in which Ivan Ivanovitch's brother achieved
his life's goal—tasting gooseberries grown on his own land.

But the story is really about Ivan, how he sees that his
brother's happiness

ignores the grief of those around him. *How many satisfied,
happy people
there really are!* he thinks. *What a suffocating force it is!*

Luke wakes from a nightmare of his father
that for a minute doesn't stop even after he sits up;
but he's exhausted, falls back to sleep, and I return to my chair,

the open volume of Chekhov like a small tent before the
dark corridor.

When Luke was three, his father hit him with a baseball bat,
left him comatose for a month.

On his sixth birthday, Luke slashed his forearm, prayed
most of the night that he would die. Angels with red wings
corner him now when he is alone. Last evening in the shower

they made him pummel his face until the aide found him.
I don't want a life that's walled off from such pain,
yet I don't want my old cult of suffering, either.

Tonight I envy what Chekhov, who once traveled 6000 miles
to Siberia
to talk with each prisoner of Sakhalin Island, tasted
years later, the night before his body was carted back
to Moscow

in a dirt-green van marked *Oysters*. Knowing he would die
before his doctor's oxygen arrived, he sent downstairs
for champagne—
Such a long time since I've tasted champagne!

Olena Kalytiak Davis

LIKE KEROSENE

Yes, it's daily
that we move into each other—but this morning
I was separate even from myself—
my hands were shovels, I had mosquito netting for hair,
and the insect beating against the night
was my heart. My name was hollow
and the sky was made of shale

when I walked into a part of morning
I've never seen: the sky still heavy, still
smouldering with the nighttimes of others,
the drunkenness and sorrow rising like dew, like fog,
like smoke back into the clouds. Suddenly,
my face was wet with it. I wanted to lie down
with it. To rest against the almost exhausted night.

Uncertain of what to do there
I started dividing the layers, the sediment,
thinking: Usually, I sleep through his sadness.

And the morning asking: Why do you keep track
of the middle of the day when you should be
waxing the moon? How can these young fragile branches
be left out in the darkness, and who set that darkness
wandering inside your heart? Who can your love ignite,
like this, like kerosene?

And then the sky lit the morning.
And then I went in to set my own house on fire.
And then I lay down next to you:
a body filling with feathers or with snow
asking: and who are you that my love can light
like this, like kerosene.

Susan Johnson

RETREAT

I knew cutting
the rose would kill it,
red-faced swimmer
over its head,
but I wanted some
of its opening,
petals unlocking,
a little museum inside.
It will take years
to explore, one room
not leading to another
but to the same stair
again and again.
I moved to this island
because I wanted to go
a little crazy,
mix up what was in
with what was out.
Knowing the simpler
I make things (at
the end of the pier
a light parting channel
from open ocean)
the more complicated
they will become.
I move inside
an enormous sweater,
deciphering the pattern
as I go. I stand
a long time talking
to the people taped
to my fridge. Most days
all I'm looking for
is a place to set

my bags, where it
will be just me
and the world: two ants,
a moth, eyes blinking
on its wings. A spider
closing my curtains
with its endless net.

Emily Bumble

Two Poems

THE TURTLE

The world too bright to bear
I move into my basement,
clear away cobwebs, sweep dust,
block out the sun
with flaps of cardboard.
I glue constellations
above my head that glow
even in day.

Weeks pass by,
the paint chips and the walls
bulge inwards. They tiptoe
closer at night like
camouflaged trees. They will
collapse around me like nylon
and harden into bone.
When I need to go to the store
I will push my head
through the window, slit holes
in walls for fists and with
my nails clawing at grass
I will move my house forward
fearing the shadow and swoop
of stars.

BLUE

Blue is a grey haired man
who finds you lost.
He is making you a present
say his wooden teeth as
his eyes wave wide and small
in the thickness of his glasses.
Ready to carry you
over the uneven cobblestones
he rushes along,
knees bending high,
arms up close to his body.
He can weigh no more than a cat.
You are part of one of his plans
though you have only met in passing.
It has grown dark early.
Under the lamplight his clothes glow white.
His beard, yellowed around his mouth
from turmeric, sways against his navel.
He scurries into his shop
where the paint, the furniture,
the atmosphere are blue.
He is a seamster. His machine
is blue. He pulls meters of green,
red, purple, and gold. He will make you
a costume. Look into my eyes,
say his teeth, I'm a young man
disguised. Now
what will you be?

Melissa Kwasny

SNOW MELT

I learn by going where I have to go.
- Theodore Roethke

You must risk cold. You must feel
love again, the bright red
inhalation,
and next, the fear, the rumble.

You must stop to smell the dead
(like marigolds, mustard).
Though they were once thought
buried, you must carry them along.

You will go deaf. There's no bird
loud enough to disprove this.
The stories, the seduction of rhyme
wash over you.
May the weak succumb and follow.

Breathstone, browbeater, you will
become all of these, the spray
on the rock, stars
caught on the jagged lips of alder.

The granite boulders lift, scrape
against each other. There is
speech and
spit. There is danger, aspiration.

You are wind whipped into froth.
As you speed,
you throw light. Someone is
behind you. Someone is going under.

Rodney Jones

Two Poems

FIRST FRAUDULENT MUSE

Not seventeen, she dumped me.
No one has to tell me
A thing about the sorrows,
Aches, indiscretions,
And calamities of young poets
Of the United States
In the late Twentieth Century.
The poem I wrote then,
The one that would make her
Want me, either for my wry
Sensitivity or the scholarly erudition
Of my heart, is not this one.

It made some obscure reference
To the goddess Diana
While drizzling bad terza-rima
About some poor decrepit wino
Eviscerating a garbage can.
My good friend looked at it
And made me know what
Kind of damn idiot I sure was.
His maxims come back—*read*
Everything, love language, revise,
Abide in the transforming fire—
And her, mutated by distance.

While I was attaching the syllables
Of a certain mulberry tree
To an adjective that I loved
She went and married an electrician.
Still I had to make a living,
Mindful of the preserving
Potential of the art,
And language clattering

Onto the platen like the small
Dark horse of the embalmer's salt.
Always it is the same night.
I called her lily of the valley
And named her in many songs.
She keeps turning
Her cold beautiful shoulder
Into someone else's words.

FILLING THE GULLY

At the gully we park the truck
And start unloading—rusted
Mufflers, rotten barn timbers,
Shank ends of PVC—
A scoop at a time, stirring it all down
Through ruptured
Sandbags and the steam
Whelming up from the combustible
Heart of the wood chips.

Thirty-five years ago my
Angry young father got
Stuck here cultivating
The Johnson grass out of the spring
Cotton and, spinning in black mud,
Sank clear to the rear axle
Before giving up and putting on
His clean pants to drive
To the midnight shift at Wolverine Tube.

For three more rainy weeks
He had to leave the tractor there
With a tin cup over the exhaust pipe
Before he could get
His elderly team of half-Percherons
And horse it out of the field,
But by then, already the gully
Was lizarding out of the rut,
Bottoming out and ending in sand.

Now my father is an old man.
When I come back in visits
One conversation deep
And three days long, I must seem
To him like one of those
Summer thunderstorms
That blows up out of the Northwest,
Makes its creek of muddy water,
And clears out by sunset.

I know he must ask,
What is my life worth?
A few poems, six lines
In the annual supplement
Of the *World Book Encyclopedia*—
When home is here—this farm
Two hundred fifty years,
Our faces and the red loam
Trussed with the same bones?

It wasn't me who worked the dirt,
So I hated it, from harrowing
To harvest, the hoe's glum
Ching off flint, abrasion
And claustrophobia of barns;
Hated even the fruit trees
My ancestors planted for shade
At eighty-yard intervals
Like stations of the cross.

Above us the sycamores
And the dark green hill of graves
Hunch like spectators
In some oddly silent stadium;
And still my father drives
The tamp down hard,
Steam spurting at his boots
As he buries the ruins—
Ten minutes, and it is done.

Keith Ratzlaff

WINTERREISE

This is the boy next door discovering
what he wants his voice to do—
that his lungs in the cold
and throat and teeth and tongue
can mirror alarm if he likes.
He fakes a bicycle crash on the ice,
jumps up, and yodels his imitation of a siren.

This is the red folder blown open in winter.
This is the street under a window.
Inside Schubert is at the piano,
singing *Die Winterreise* for the first time
to friends: "Never again will the leaves
be green at the window. Never again
will I hold my love in my arms."
And they hate it.

This is Paul Klee's *Winterreise*,
a portrait of the artist one-eyed,
caped and hooded at his mother's grave.
This is Klee's mother on the way to his studio.
This is Schubert in the November marigolds.
This is the boy outside my window
making the journey again and again
down his driveway, pedaling hard on the ice,
staging his accidental death,
rising and singing like an ambulance.

This is the white fog changing to yellow.
This is Klee's mother after tea in his studio.
This is Schubert dying of syphilis.
This is Schubert singing to the crows:
"Krähe, crow, even if you want to leave me
don't leave me. Don't leave me."
This is Ida Klee walking into Klee's studio

after tea on the day she died.
Klee was in his chair, asleep.
Evergreens were on the horizon.

This is Ida Klee released from paralysis,
This is her ghost walking the studio
after tea, after she had died,
winking at her son as if it mattered—
that kind of message from the dead—
winking at Klee, who was not surprised,
who for the rest of his life took it seriously.

This is the folder blown open in winter.
A week later Johann Vogel sang
Die Winterreise to Schubert's friends
and they listened
and loved it this time.

This is Vogel's baritone in the marigolds,
the wondrous conduit of his throat
and mouth, diaphragm, teeth and lungs.
These are the crows who throw snow
at Schubert's scorned lover
from every roof of every house in town.

There are accidents of the flesh;
there are the unbalanced lovers
we have been and still are.
Yesterday the twist of sunlight in a room
filled me with longing.
This is me putting on my coat,
walking downtown to sing
Christmas carols in the open square.
This is Klee painting himself from memory.
This is the boy who has been dying all day
hoarse and unrescued, going in to supper.
I've driven by the same woman's house
for 20 years remembering she kissed me.
This is me in the December marigolds.
These are her father's fields blown full of snow.

E.G. Burrows

THE COLLY BIRDS

In the song of the Twelve Days
there are hens and geese and colly birds
as well as milkmaids and dancing men.

You must know that the colly birds
are coal-black, are blackbirds, like one
heard singing above our rooms

at the villa, one room
over the parked cars, the abandoned wagons,
above what were once stables.

Much that was holy was born there
under the merle-song of the coal-bird whose blackness
rang out with great joy

even without footmen or girls
herding lambs to the Italian barnyard,
not a child but love nevertheless,

all twelve days of our rising
to the song of the colly bird in the locust
and no small wonder in the pear tree.

Barbara Savadge Horton

HAIR

A man is thinking of his wife's hair,
of the length of it, and of how, like water,
it reflected light. He is thinking,
as the sky turns faintly pink and gold,
that her hair was the color of dark
water. He used to hold
it in his hands and brush and comb and braid it.
I am thinking of a man who is
my father and of his wife, my mother.
I am thinking of the hair I said

was black when I was little, and of how
she would correct me, call it dark brown.
I am thinking of the way I'd sit
still as water, let her brush my own
hair that was blond, of how the brush felt
like a long caress, the length of me,
my mother's hand, light streaming from
a window back of us, pooling on
the carpet, gray as wings. She used to
make an "onion peel" when she shampooed

my hair and she let me look
into a mirror, laugh to see it.
In a photograph she holds
me in sunlight, an infant, on her
shoulder, her back to the camera,
her hair streaming. She's wearing a long
dressing gown that trails upon the ground.
She's trapped by hair—I hold a fistful
but it's slipping through my fingers just
as the brush would empty into air.

Patricia Goedicke

TREEHOUSE

When you're blind, when nothing touches you.
When nothing moves. When it's quiet.

Then a drop of rain. On a tin plate.
Roof of the house. Far off

in the big maple, *splat*. Tick.
From leaf to leaf

moving. Each flat
dusty drop squirts. Titters. Drips

down to the next level, so many
huge rooms, just

listen:
anvil to stirrup to hammer

your chest fills,
the outside rushes in.

Especially when it's not rain
but Bach, maybe,

quick, in the woods, then slower,
tall columns of sound beckoning you

deeper and deeper, each voice calling
back and forth to the others, what are these

spaces opening out for you, round
hollows you can step into

smoothly, clearings where you can move out
from the rumbling laps of chords

and between them. Surrounded by redwood trunks,
trails winding through the forest

go on. Follow them. You can.
With yawns, deep breaths

from the top of the brain to the bottom.
Nerve cells

all over the body branch out, perception
piles itself on perception.

Up behind the temples
piccolos, little pieces of thought jump

from twig to twig, yes
you can hear yourself think, in music

in rich, twanging vibrations
strings gossip; from the basses

the constant grumble of desire. Above,
from the sonorous right half

of the cortex to the clever syntax of the left
or vice versa, ideas ricochet

off each other, now you hear them
now you don't, though they say

the distance between low C
and middle C on the piano

is almost the same as the interval between the two areas
that hear them in your brain. Soft sounds light up

some rooms. Loud sounds spotlight
others, upstairs and downstairs

strokes crackle and hiss, so many
levels of illumination, *flash*

your mother frowns at you from the kitchen,
whispers leap up and die down

all over the house. With old wives' tales
dismembered. Long ago snatches of song.

Marching orders, smart footsteps like snare drums
break up and then regroup

like gulls quarreling. Whole paragraphs
of new information, facts rush in and out

•

from room to room expanding
like steam in rusty radiators.

With sighs, creaks, groans,
startled exclamation marks rising

right up to the attic, in the terrified moral ping
of cold air heating up

like shrill tendrils,
torn cobwebs tug at you

in the middle of a long speech
you're trying to make to yourself in the study

•

Wait! somebody interrupts
in another rhythm entirely

Be quiet, you tell yourself,
but the heckler's raspberry erupts, rude sounds

sputter in the background. With coughs. Harrumphs. Dark
horizontal streams rustling on top of each other like branches

that keep quivering, in tiny accidental
puns, wordplay, screeches

like chalk on a blackboard, crossed
fingers for luck but not wires:

blind, you can still move
to the sounds you hear, with great sweeping wings

from the cellos, from shuddering rosewood,
from walnut cornucopias spilling

even in the busiest
cerebral foliage, in dense

polyphonic crowds murmuring there are still paths,
cadences to lead you onward

•

from one scale to another, quiet
but still moving. From the faded keys of the past

to the brisk fruit of resolutions
you know will be coming soon

or not coming. But even with so many dissonances
dissolving from limb to limb

the future is still hovering ahead of you
where it always was:

in the deep, rainy
live present of leaves

in the mind's forest glimmering
there, where you're moving towards it

faster and faster now, perhaps whistling a tune
to keep yourself company?

Erin Malone

Three Poems

**A MATHEMATICIAN'S COLLISION
WITH THE NATURAL WORLD**

Leaning back beneath a tree in the sun's patched light,
she marvels at the shape of all things broken,
pyramids formed by light breaking through even branches.

Everywhere are regular shapes of triangles. Not reserved
only for rooftops and traffic cones, they appear at the peak
of any trajectory, visually, like a ball hit and caught,

like a girl's voice climbing steadily up, making line graphs
in her mind. If possibilities of mountains leave her
with heaps of joy, placid water is an infinite drowning.

She likes better the splinter of space defined,
the assumption of not too much. Each thing in its place.
Interrupted now by noon-time geese pointedly

stalking her lunch, their hunt as aggressive as the ridges
on their shining dark beaks, she feels a glimmer
of fear, something she can't answer for. Would they attack,

bite, their wings unfolding, shattering the air?
She shakes her head, throws her arms out
to keep them back, earning a blaring reproach.

She's calmed by the angles even her body makes,
how they balance and protect. Interpreting
the branches above her, she reaches to pull

a tangle from her hair and discovers in its strands
something dropped. A leaf? Fumbling to get it out, she's stunned
twice by the bee's spiny intervention. And again

They've reached a common vertex.
She leaps up, swaggering, shaking out her hair,
the stings sharp as a handsaw's teeth, gripping bites

causing her to wheel in an orbit against earth's motion.
For one moment she's clear with pain. Then her vision swells,
runs disordered, now a tilting globe shocked under a tide of poison.

VISIT

Behind the mesh netting of the baseball field
it nettles along under trees, woken
by burning lights faceted like eyes
of insects. The possum
noses towards us. Staring us down
across the silver fence, it turns
to the underbrush, carries moonlight
away on its back. We should have called to it:
I've heard of angels caught
in form. Earlier today, my father
telephoned with news
of his mother's death. Moments
drifted by. Neither of us spoke. Then
something filled the window,
an air balloon, stained-glass sheets
of wind. I mentioned this. My father
cleared his throat, seeing the balloon
shade in his own neighbor's lawn. But he lives
in another state. To say
it's coincidence is not enough. I want
to know that we are not alone, that the field
is not too large to cross. Years ago

I would stand each night
under trees across the street
from a widow's house, waiting for light
to open against her upstairs windows,
a signal she was all right. Part of me
is still there, pine needles
settling around my feet. But not distant:
you could look long enough at the animal shape
of my eyes and know it's me, blinking
under the fine net of the moon.

AFTER WINTER

The horse stands at the orange gate
shaking his rusty head
as the barking dog shoots through the yard toward
the limits of the thin wire fence. I can't resist

the sun, so we take our conversation
out to the back deck where the tallest firs
move like paper straws in the wind. In my hands
is this landscape I'd forgotten,

the lines I've crossed, spending my first
winter in the small of the city, its gray crouched
in the rungs of my spine. I'm back
because I'm tied here. You say

you feel tired, but I revel in
the sun's attention, how last night it left
a pole of neon like a ladder to the mountain.
Where it began was unclear—somewhere

in mid-air, and you can't trust
what isn't grounded. You know spring is full
of snow that winter didn't bring, that tomorrow
it might hide the dusty road, cause the marble

angel to hover whitely where it presides
over the cemetery lawn. So you keep

an eye out for those first clouds while I run
in my mind through the dry white

fields as they looked this morning,
lit and no shadows crossing.
The horse stands like a vane, weather-wise,
and the dog runs crazy though his acre, leaping.

Jeanne Lohmann

THE LOGICIANS

If light ripples the soft edges of air
so they open like silk, as some insist

they do, the premises we keep do not
allow such rifts in ordinary cloud.

The possibility of mind unloosed,
relieved of thought, moving to rhythms

not of our making, does not concur
with synthesis we know. Offhand

we cannot bring to mind a time we saw
the closed world leap apart, wheels

turning in heaven, a descent of angels
on ladders. We don't remember when

we dream, and when we sleep we shift
our weight, uneasy on the stone.

Thomas Brush

OLD MAN

Sometimes all he has are ten stone steps
That lead to the wooden doors
The wind couldn't open, the colors of snow
That swirl and call back
The cold

Winter air, 1944. Sometimes the bar is a field
Of rags sliding down the wet glass, old men burning
Newspaper. A black sky. Smoke
Heavy and thick as memory. He talks about a storm
Of words his father swims in, the ghosts of arguments
Through broken walls, hard
Linoleum floors, the comfort of a boxcar,
Pillows of straw.

He remembers light
Staining his hands, the shadow of rain
Climbing to the fourth floor,
Someone laughing
In his sleep, old stories
One face at a time.

Sometimes he can smell pine needles,
Taste the sweet gum of pitch, see summer melting
Into mountains of green shale, feel the warm skin
Of leather.

But all that was before the war
Ended, before he emptied boxcars
Of darkness, drove a cab ten hours a day, tended

Bar at the sad end of the graveyard
Shift. Sometimes he hears
Himself raging against his dreams, lies, drunk

On everyone's wish to start over, be someone
Else, try again
With another face, name, place,
As if each day weren't fragile
And lethal as glass.

Marlene Blessing

SAY THE FATHERS

Say the fathers return
in the way of the moon, soft,
incandescent, full of reflection.
Say they no longer
howl and bay at the creature
that is my mother.
They remember her name.
Say they love the nest of my dreams.
Here they enter the empty
room where an apple rests,
where light defines nothing but ordinary
tastes. Say they touch each false
wall in my heart. Every shadow parts
a grief. My breath finds
its way. Say the fathers have come
to be bone. I shake out
the past and bury it once more.
Say they will never walk on water
or appear at the place
where I drink. I imagine
their tears. Say we wear flesh
without poems. They call me *daughter*.
And the wordless sea washes home.

WANTED: SCARECROWS.
HAYSTACKS AND MANNEQUINS ENCOURAGED TO APPLY

Not crows so much as jumbo jets.
Those silos soaring overhead knew how to goad,

exactly how to taunt our stuffed men
'til it hurt. They must've thought, Where's Amsterdam?

Where are the cappuccinos and sourdough rolls
along Fisherman's Wharf?

thought, Movies lighting up the drive-in come so late
the outcomes change: heroes lose, and love fails

acres away. So it was Adios suckers!
They tossed their burlap bellies aboard,

dangled boots out of freight cars,
tamped their corn-cob pipes,

the moon like a peach, impatient girls in kitchens
filling their sleep: the shucking and braiding,

canning and pies, and longing
for Lincoln, Lawrence, Minneapolis,

for older, educated boys stretched out in the dark,
and Ellington records,

Claude Debussy, Nina Simone.
Oh loneliness, they'd have moaned, What it must mean

to throw bodies together, rubbing
broomstick limbs and backbones 'til they spark.

Whoosh! Sweet conflagration. Fragrant smoke
They took M.B.A.'s, formed import companies,

had lovely, diapered rag dolls in Buster Brown shoes.
They'd overheard talk: There's profit

in baskets, rattan furniture, Panama hats...
a whole world beyond the Corn Belt to stride out and take.

NOW HIRING SPHINXES FOR BORDER PATROL.
MUST BE WILLING TO RELOCATE

The riddle: A man lies dead in a field beside his pack.
Inside, had he opened it, is something
which would have saved his life.
Answer correctly or die.

And I know where we're headed now:
Aerial view of the Rio Grande, dizzying
zoom, a panicked Latina pleading uselessly
for clues... Ellis Island where the corpses pile

in heaps, their throats bruised black, backs
snapped in two... Seattle, Washington,
and thirteen Cantonese busboys
down the hatch.

Such desperate stammering:
Is it water? Salt beef. Geiger counter. Insulin.
Swiss-army knife. Uh... lightning rod? A gun?
Nope. Nunca. Nyet. The bleaching wishbones.

The deliberate picking of teeth.

Ah! sweet success. Now how about a squadron
in the Bronx, a kind of pilot program.
Issue tear gas and bullet-proof vests

and see how it goes. Take a bite out of crime.

But suppose the solution leaks.
Suppose thousands cross over in airplanes,
stow aboard Ultra-lites, Icarus,
illegally *parachute* in,

which is the answer—a chute
still stuffed inside the dead man's nylon pack—
Then sic 'em with gryphons, too.
Whip us up another riddle. Start again.

Laurie Lamon

THE POEM

watches the road for the house
where you turn in, certain
the gravel drive is meant for you,
and the backyard trees
whose green rooms you dream
nightly. It opens the door.
It carries you over the threshold,
lifting the briefcase, the paper.
When you take off your dress and shoes,
it rubs against your feet;
naked, it looks back from the mirror.
Even now, its fingers at
your throat, its mouth against yours,
it is sobbing, it wants to begin
with the story of your life.

Philip Dacey

SELF-PORTRAIT IN LYND

The horses chew and I read, four heads bowed
and browsing in a green world—I think I am ripping
words with my teeth out of some willing ground—

where the cousins evening and autumn reunite to brew
a sweetness on the lifting air apples fall through
at my back—the thud the music of excess—

bruising themselves where bees will mass,
a danger to me gathering day's-end treats,
one of which once, inanimate globe, all rosy

passivity in my hand, impossibly bit me
and which I will pour with a galvanized clatter
over the fence into the circle of scholars

poring over an indecipherable if digestible
ancient text, every margin thickly overgrown
with a perfume glossing these hours

so well it becomes its own text, the drift
something about a neck as firm against a palm
as the spine of a book, the curve of a flank

repeating, natural wonder, the exact curves
of the twin mounds of that book fallen open,
the tail a mind in restless motion,

the greater wonder that such flimsy pages
together could make such a solid volume,
which the wind will tear at with its teeth.

PICKLED PIG'S FEET

My father closed up early,
when the sun over Main
settled on thick glass
in the bar's front window
like an impotent fact
fixed there, gawking in
at stale shadows.
Blown dust from a slant
yellow sky sifted down
across the country—bare stalks
broken in wind, red feed cap
snagged in a frozen ditch,
streets emptied by the never-
ending crises of the seventies.
He locked up and withdrew
to the permanent dark
that collects in the back
of taverns, that inhabits air
hockey and bumper pool.
He and Joe, a drunk
laid off from Deere
he drank with and despised,
sank onto barstools
under the Hamm's bear
grinning blue in the face
of a clock slowed to bar time.
Between them a heavy jar
of pig's feet, pickled in brine
dense with silence and decay,
seemed to give off its own light,
twigs and peppercorns
suspended in yellow silt,
planets of blood and fat, hanging.

LOCATION

Robin Williams, they say, has already checked out,
moved on—but here at the tag-end of this small town's
week-long Big Deal, here on blocked-off Main Street,
here among the watching star-struck crowd, the trailers

of Tri-Star Pictures are still lined up curbside and humming,
the cameramen are still angling for shots, and I, unstar-struck
at the moment and pleased with my new curly-cut, am only trying
to walk home from the Main Salon, when I find myself

up against a barricade, the cop struggling to hold spectators
back. But nothing's been happening for minutes, only
the heaped-up leaves littering Central Square, blowing
around the painted-to-look-rundown gazebo, the cannon—
its fake rust. So I ask the cop can I cross? He says

if I go now I can. I squeeze through and stroll out
in my fleecy brown jacket, my wicked-good hairdo.
Suddenly a loudspeaker—Voice from Everywhere, Nowhere—
fills the sky, booming: YOU—THE LADY IN THE BROWN JACKET.

THE LADY IN THE BROWN JACKET. A thousand eyes turn, I
freeze
mid-street, fifty, overweight, scarlet, not knowing: forward?
back? And everyone, the cameras that are about to roll,
the lighting wizards, prop-people, the stuntman

driving the gray Toyota wagon that's about to careen
across the Square, the kid that's about to dash across
in front of it, the ambulance that's about to
in just one second tear screaming down Court Street, the extras

that are looters, the ones that are the itchy-scratchy homeless,
the ones that are about to run away from the wild animals,

everyone, the hundreds huddled in the cold waiting for
Something To Happen, the whole world that's about to be born,

stops dead in its tracks—FOR ME.

IN THE CITY WITHOUT A NAME

Nothing takes you where you want to go: the bus of a wrong shape
lets you off down the hill by a park where a man you don't know
is walking his dog. He asks you to sail the Caribbean and seems
disappointed when you say you don't have six thousand dollars.

Back in your apartment you learn there have been
six random murders in five days. You learn the class you wanted
on form is already full and your keys are lost.
They are always lost or tangled. Nothing opens easily.

A bird on the side lawn is mortally injured and somehow
you are to blame. You lay it in the tall weeds
and go away. All day it flies
after you—you cannot save it or kill it.

Your work has grown to a thick stack and the hunchback poet
bends over it, encouraging you. She is kind but the children
are lost again and you must leave your work to find them.
It is your fault, always your fault. They come home
scratched, dirty, unforgiving.

At your aunt's cocktail party, you seduce a fox-haired sailor.
In someone else's bed, the two of you lie down
to consume yourselves like over-ripe pears.
Although he's been dead for years, your husband breaks
through the door, his fist and voice raised, a rifle in the car.

On the floor of the crowded state hospital
you try to carve out a place, a bed of straw.

The boxcar moves forward into the mist.
Because there is little hope,

you must take the crying toddler in your arms and heal him
with just the right words.

This is all you can do.
Almost every night there are rain storms;
on the worst nights, tornadoes. You close yourself
in a room with no windows and hang on
to a railing, a chair, whatever you can.

If only there were keys—or a credit card
with a workable number; if only you could complain
to someone who would listen.

Sarah Gorham

POEM ENDING IN DENIAL

1. SECOND SNOW

This one moves in sheets, whitewater fast,
laying down stripes along my street. An artery...
I can't help it, I see her illness everywhere: in perspiring
manhole covers, in the pear-shaped cavities of trash baskets.
Craters left over from the first snow.
And the idle jackhammer
like a syringe lying on its side. I can't forget
even with a walk through salt
laid down with such good intention.
It's overkill—ruining my leather shoes, my car.
The car itself, asleep like a body in a sheeted bed;
my fussy footprints, circling.

2. WINTER BREAK

Some animal lies in the tunnel.
It has made of her bone a curtain with torn spots,
stains. She's calm now, mustering her strength.
I should be... Instead I drive north, away,

nervous past rusting bridges, stubble, salt mounds
in the shape of breasts.

The Quality Inn sign is a fake sun, rising next to the real one.
How well this suits me. I let it pull me in, waiting
till a voice twangs: Reservations for Glider?
The name's Gorham but here's a little dance all the same, so I skate
and duck over the seamless wall-to-wall. My friend is sick

and I am stupid with relief. I sing to the Madonna
pumped through hidden speakers. I bed down with acrylic
and brass under curtains that stand up to the worst
wear and tear. My worry goes, a plume of smoke
rising to the ceiling like a giant stuffed lion.

3.
The movie had two plots: Claire was cast for the pain,
me the pleasure. She lay on a metal bed, a tent above her
skinny legs. I walked through a meadow lined with trees.
The break in her femur clouded her thinking; my walk
settled me, focused my thought, though I shuddered with the scrape

of steel. Surely, the meadow charmed her. All this where we sat,
inches apart, shifting in our padded chairs. My friend and I,
my family, others. We watched while God withdrew his hand,
fingers curling inside his fist like credits rolled to the roof.
Claire's name went first. As if to spare the rest of us,
the house lights came up fast.

4.
I came to face the facts
and then I swear I saw her
in the fold of the pocket door:
salty hair, tail
of her bathrobe yanked sharply
away. I whispered, Hello?
And then she appeared again
near the fridge, voice
like a snare drum, low growl.
Her finger waved its point:

All she wanted was an apple
and I checked to see if I had one.
Yes! the shiny prize rolled,
loose from its bag. She'd stolen
a bite—I'd know that mouth
print anywhere. Shadows?
I say facts. She's coming back.
She'll be her usual self
any day now.

Trevor West Knapp

Two Poems

THE DEAD RESPOND AT LAST TO OUR ENTREATIES

Tell us, why
do you persist? Do you suppose
your lamentations, your pleas and bargainings,
will accomplish what our own could not?
Why do you disturb us
with your grief? — our hearts already
are steeped in your brine, bruised
by your words, sharp pebbles
clattering down on us. Did you imagine
we had no grief of our own
and so could put our shoulders
beneath the load you bear?

It is we
for whom the open hand of the world
with its radiant gesture of welcome
has tightened
into the impenetrable fist. It is we
who are left behind: Without us
the drops of rain still quiver
on the undersides of branches; the crickets,
after dusk, still rustle the grass,
the unraked leaves, chafe out
their chorus, their simple brute urge

to make a sound.

How hard it becomes
to hear you continuously
calling our names, the feeble syllables
we might otherwise forget
echoing across the broad lake
that separates us, though we attend to you,
faithfully and against our will,
because we remember what it is like to believe
such gestures of raw need
could do some good. But listen:

Grieve
for yourselves. If we once supposed death
would be oblivion, we now regret
what time we wasted because we let ourselves
be comforted by that. Even here
it falls on us, faint shadow
of the world you live in. Even here,
where there is no sun, we
crave it, just the same, each day
unable to shrug off
the same hard lesson
of the body, that broken stem
that still aches to blossom.

A DEAR JOHN LETTER: TO REGRET

We've come far together, haven't we,
Regret? Even you who are so quick
to second guess can't fault the tenderness
with which I've helped you rise each morning,
the patience with which I've clamped onto my back
the elaborate harness I need to carry you, my only,
my dove, each cumbersome strap wrapping its particular
knuckle of doubt, a hundred jagged spurs
to drum one pair of sweat-stained flanks. Don't fret,
I can account for all of them, each friend I meant
to write back to, every chance I didn't take,
the ways I might have helped but was too selfish,

and — numerous as stars yet chattering like seeds
inside unstoppable maracas — every word
I wish I'd never said. Wooed
with such inspiring precision, tell me, of what
could you possibly complain, o heart, o honey
bee, o prince of the piercing gaze? Haven't we
been inseparable, cruising unfamiliar
city sidewalks, every laundromat and market,
every wave-washed shore? When I've been
without appetite and sleepless, haven't you felt
your spryest, fat as an ox, well-rested, haven't you
thrived? Surely by now you can fend, king
of this mountain we've labored up,
its towering oaks, its laurel, its scrub, the dazzling
vista from the precipice, the harvested fields
stubbled with corn stumps where in the spring
farmers will jounce along, the green stalks
sprouting behind them, rising like armies
to salute you, while in the distance,
growing smaller, I'll be the one
emptying my pockets, not looking back.

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WE NEED YOUR HELP

Poetry Northwest is in its thirty-fifth 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

