POETRY NORTHWEST AUTUMN 1995 VOLUME XXXVI, NUMBER 3

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ROB CARNET
We've Read Your Application. Please Sit Down

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Are You Moving?

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Rob Carney

WE'VE READ YOUR APPLICATION. PLEASE SIT DOWN

Say what you want, but convince me,
show me I'm wrong. Prove you can compete
with Friday night, the gleaming Cadillacs
and Corvettes touring the track,

the escorts' tuxedos,
the court of high school beauties
waving their arms, their bodies
slipped in sleeveless gowns.

Compete with the mood,
the hip flasks and letterman's jackets,
parents flicking cigarettes in groups along the fence,
and everyone waiting, ready to lose themselves for hours.

You can say these leaves mean winter
and an ancient, troubled sleep.
They'll crash through home team posters, ripped bits
taking the wind as they take the field . . .

and the thrum of a thousand feet stamping,
and a thousand clapping hands,
the chanting from five hundred ritual mouths,
the throb as they wait for the build-up to break
when the kick-off comes. Ah, yes! Hear the pads smacking.
When they huddle—curtains of steam.
There is, after all, much to this,
each small-town, Friday-autumn play.

Antigone? Look—I tell you look at the girls
in their legs, white gloves, long hair, and perfume and pleats...
the grounds crew could surface the track
with the night boys spend, the grainy daydreams
piled at bobby-socked feet. And these girls,
or their mothers, dry-clean uniforms each week.
They create, rehearse more cheers.
I’m saying they care. This counts.

Now you—can you make me taste comeback
in my coffee? Can you cradle hope
deep in my chest, fold it in my arms
like a hand-off-off-tackle for 4th down’s necessary yard?

If I run a fly, you’ll deliver the touchdown,
then be there with teammates
to bury me, grinning, alive?
You’ll get the gut-sunk ache of the losing side as well,
the weight of their sousaphones
and bass drums packing up,
the mud as they slump for their buses,
then quietly home?

Think about what you’re up against, pal.
What do you mean
when you tell me you want to be a poem?

FARMER’S MARKET VISITATION

Lettuce—Canasta, Cocarde, Merveille des Quatre Saisons, and more
unknowns, but brilliant, brass-red, butter, leaf, batavian.
And cherries, so plum-fat yellow I’m overcome
with pie-thoughts, pass up raspberries, couldn’t cram
cobbler for breakfast, compote for lunch, two kinds
of pie for dinner, and leave room
for bokchoy, pea-vine, rapini, rocket, mizuna.

Green leaves fountain in my open bags, and I’m deciding
how to talk—bubble exuberant colors, or restrain,
one thing so right
the others dry away. Later, blue larkspur sways
inside the fence, but melon-pink poppies buzz
from over, so I can’t cross out. I wish
my father alive to help, he’d love
the spinach bouquets so neatly tied, he’d josh
across counters, ask gardener’s questions—

by tables of tomato starts, it’s him in me
savoring labels: Red Calabash, Brandywine, Brimmer,
him touching Stupice leaves, darker than Romas,
“Called ‘potato-leaf,’” the man explains—
no explanation,
but good to know. He’d love the paths
the customers draw, leaning forward
for cantaloupe, lifting with both hands,
stem-end to nose, and lowering: love

the resulting tangle invisible as fine fishline
hung up and bangling trees, or floating toward
its subtle underwater job. He’d love the booths,
the daughter pricing artichokes. In some twist of time,
I’d be her, summer Saturdays in town to sell

not just these sea-green thistles burnished blue,
vanish underwater. Milk, he stirred, 
and set the carton on its milky ice, 
but I was set for anything by then, 
two chairs tipped back, two cups to noses, toes 
propped in the dawning window lustered 
as the lake began to shine.

Next thing
I know, two cups on an L.A. stovetop, 
two tags, shy, and trailing down. Two teas 
all the way immersed. A Chinese box, 
green, pink, white, with Irish Breakfast sealed 
in two green rows—such secret envelopes, 
and lemons met us at the window, 
all globes suns, and gravity the breezes 
bright in every branch at once,

the shift
a mystery like broth, which must cook longer 
than you think, and longer still, but you 
can smell it deepen, pull the door to darker 
passages of flavor. I had never 
let a teabag steep so long. He barely 
knew me, nor I him, but I count the first 
question what he asked me then, approaching 
with the cups. Did I like my teabag squeezed?
Yes, I said, and drank those richest drops.

TEABAG BALLAD
The water-urn I count as where we met. 
I watched him pass the coffee-pot to choose 
his tea, watched him lay the string across 
the lip, small weight dangling like Foucault’s pendulum. Gravity slipping so soon? 
The center shifted, I did too, but hot 
water poured to hold the dangling down.

Makeshift 
world, this tray of splashed packets, plastic stirrers, tea gone stale, flat water not quite boiled. And yet his slow moves showed me how fine hands can shape thin air. I thought tea would turn forever as he stirred, center of a whirl. I’d snapped down spigots, loosed a flush, pushed a stick to rush the steeping on, burnt my fingers giving one last squeeze—he still paused. Opened sugar. I saw white fans
**GREEN FISH BLUE**

I dreamt of lilies growing from the waves, sad trumpeters along the shore.

There is a woman who dyes her hair green and plays the trumpet in a punk rock band.

Woman of my dreams. She's doing a show in Minneapolis, a show in Wichita.

We bought matching shoes. I've never been to Wichita, though when she's there,

I can feel it on the bottom of my feet.

I could dye my hair blue.

I botched a test in physiology: a) draw a flow diagram of the subtle mechanisms of the inner ear, or b) the mechanisms of sight (trace the path of refracted light striking the retina to the formation of an image in the occipital lobes). I can hear my own heart beating. A fluorescent bulb fluoresces in my periphery.

I think of the trumpet player, how she refrained from rolling her eyes as the light I could not contain struck her retinas, reassembling a version of itself and the memory of light at the back of her brain, whoever she thought I was, a biochemical facsimile, an impostor. How she refrained from rolling her eyes as the waves flowed from my mouth to sway the fine cells of her inner ear.

I drew a flow diagram to Wichita, every arrow pointing to my shoes.

**Amy Scattergood**

**THE LIGHTHOUSE KEEPER**

His eyes are pressed to the sea like glass against rain, narrowed by humility or complex weather. The wheel of light escorts him through his own home, circling among tea cups, whisky bottles, walls made of dust and kerosene.

Certain wind and birds sound out language.

The sky is a map of wet paper. Between fissures in storms he builds warmth out of wool and coffee, his knuckles breaking like pencils against dull, ordinary surfaces. For bread he has his rolled maps and the fork of a compass and the knife of an old astrolabe.

For fifty years the surf has been his breathing. The moon is his Ulysses, traveling back and forth across the sky and between stars like islands.

He understands waiting. The winds are dogs to comfort him, the gulls a radio from distant places. He knows the ship will come to him.
from around the horizon. It will be oak
and leather and iron painted
by his own light. Only he will see it.
Only he can slide it out from the rocks
and unveil it to the wind and rescue its sails
from the fog that is its own sail.
It will be his ship. Ulysses will move away from the sky
and the island that is his house
will row away in the revolving night.

KOLGRIM'S SAGA

They knew there was a curse on the land.
The fjords were locking up;
they could hear the keys turning at night
after the wind blew out their seal-oil lamps.
The wasting pastures climbed lower
into the ground. At Herjolfsnes the sea-water
had eroded the old burial mound. After storms
they would try and pick up all their ancestors.
They kept them in skin bags and on mantelpieces.
The earth had frozen into a network of fossils.
So when Kolgrim seduced another man's wife by black magic,
they decided to burn him. It was the only way
to retrieve their sanctity, the nobility that had wandered
away with the seals and the schools of fish
and the bishop, who had been promised to them
twenty-five years ago but who never came.
They gathered everything they could find
to build the pyre. It had to be a big enough fire
to kill Kolgrim and all their sins. They would send crates of the ashes
back to the bishop to prove their worthiness.
Down at the shore they collected what was left of the driftwood,
an assembly of brittle artifacts
that had been whittled thin by the violent waves.
Then they broke up the boats. The women
piled their furniture on the pyre. The children took all their toys
and stacked them one on top of each other.
In a procession of solemn sacrifices, the village
rebuilt itself on the pile. They took down their houses
and reassembled them, they unmoored their last boats from the harbor
and crossed their oars like match sticks
and brought their whale-bone fences down from the pastures.
For days they combed the settlement
for every last thing: harpoons and caribou slippers and compasses,
pockets of grass and peat from the taken-down roofs.
What was left of their animals wandered aimlessly,
their fences and shelters and leather harnesses gone
to the top of the pyre. They brought Kolgrim
and washed his hair in seal-oil.
They filled his shoes with it and doused his hands and feet.
They wanted to make certain
that he would burn through the difficult climate.
The fire moved under the low blanketing clouds
and threw shadows on the rock pedestals and on the faces
of the impassive crowd. Kolgrim stared
at nothing in particular as his arms became wicks
and the tallow of his skin melted down. After a while
the sky was black with soot. Later the town moved away
and sat down by a mountain.
Because there was no place else to go now.
They'd burnt up everything.
With no ships to leave in or houses to wait inside
or even anything new to burn for light,
the villagers contracted and receded like the glacier
that had come for them. After the fire died,
they grew colder and colder. The punishment
overwhelmed the crime until they could not remember
exactly who had died or why. It became some legend
they muttered about during the unfathomable night
as they kneaded the last plants with the ashes and ice
and tried to make sparks with little slivers of flint and ion.
When no light came they settled down and waited.
Mark Krausbaar

LES WAVERLY: SECRETS IN CONVERSATION

Dear Friends,
Why take my "easy course"? Well, Why indeed. Well, too often I would find myself "tongue-tied" before now. Like you I had quickly soon found out where I was surely sinking in my aim of the future. The point being that it was magnified in my mind in the fact that I was frequently not progressing in a particular manner.
Take my easy course, buy my simple book or tape for I could go all day as I am never "at a loss of words" for any longer since discovering it:

- Popularity plus
- Gala functions
- On the phone
- Key phrases
- Punch line
- Find out if they are listening
- Light touch

In my simple book or tape which I will pass on cheaply with it I give my personal regards that you could be ugly as a foot but they would believe anything and you are likewise aimed in the road of life by following in the superb ways laid down:

- Dig up a sinking conversation
- Breed sincerity
- Light touch

Therefore, if you ask me, "Les, honestly how do you do it?" or, "Les, how may I get ahead or be polished in a gathering?" you will either shortly be a shiny example or a complete refund.

Roger Mitchell    Two Poems

BONES OF SMALL CHILDREN

This is the place where all one afternoon I watched thousands of grackles pass over. It was either just before or just after something. I think it was after. All afternoon, the grackles cluttered across the sky, sky the color of all that clacking and flapping. Today, a man and a woman get out of a car and walk down to the shore. Fifty feet, no more. They look at the ground as they walk, one in front of the other. The hill on the other side of the bay begins to throw off its leaves. It stands quietly while doing this. The man looks at the lake; the woman, the small stones at her feet. I think they say something to one another. The day is windless, the sky a blue you can't look at without thinking. They walk back to the car as though manacled. They drive over the stones as though over the bones of small children.
I DON'T KNOW WHERE MY STUDENTS ARE THIS YEAR

I put them in my pocket with a big blue cookie last year. Then rolled over on it in a dream and crushed the tenure system, bones and all. My students started yowling like a zoo. The neighbors moved out. It was too eventual. So, I passed out the short evaluation forms and asked them please think of everything the president has done. They didn't fall for that one, but fell instead for rock and roll, the chance to kerouac across the country. Even I drank beer, half way up a lifetime on a roof, and lay there lapping stars out of a bowl.

I married in a church once, woman not my own. The minister was Lutheran. Luther was a crank. He came to the wedding anyway, griped and moaned about the pope. I've heard it all, I said, just wanted then to get to Alabama and the ten thousand roaches sleeping in the walls, a block from the world's largest lot of faceless gray stones, what they dragged back from Shiloh in the dark.

The night we spent in Texas, the coffee shop in Memphis. The chance to be together till the end. When it starts bleeding like a song, the wind behind a billboard, and twenty miles of empty on the gauge, it's a southeast Nevada, nuclear disaster, mutant kind of cactus kind of night. You prickle at the drapery shoved across the sky and hope to be promoted to a stone.

THE OBVIOUS GOODS (for Kelly)

Snow, at least, has stealth to its credit. You wake up and find the whole town occupied, reinforcements parachuting silently down.

But rain like this, you almost have to laugh, the glitz and then the big drum rolls, the overstatement of gutters. And the raindrop is no snowflake, just the same old tear, larger or smaller. No grade-school craft class snips out its arabesques to tape to the window.

So consider us, here in the bed, two bodies of water, mostly, and hardly subtler: this species of naked is jaybird, or buck. What can we do but applaud the obvious goods, like rain? Let's have our kissing mimic its blatant patter.

And if I bring out the plain truths again, about your beauty, about my love, please blame it on this good weather, this out-loud rain, dripping with all it can't find better ways to say.
YOUR TOWN

There's still a river giving back the leap
of each bridge. And your house, the dried blood
of its brick. The steel mills stand where they stood
but they've slipped

their skins and flown to South America
or the Far East, and town kids roam the hulls
picking off squirrels. Where winter’s dug potholes
it exca-

vates the roads that rattled your car windows.
And now it seems there's one old friend’s sister
who's stuck here long enough to have lost her
mind, but knows

that I'm your son, that I'm living here now,
that you would help if you knew imposters
masquerading as her brother whisper
to her how

she should sell them her property. She knows,
too, what they're after: the uranium.
Is Clyde Reese my father? Could I write him?
So it goes

in the old town, Dad, in the old piss-hole.
Deliverance is a Lotto-win away,
we're all sitting on gold if only we
could shovel

it up somehow. The good days aren't gone, just
buried, and if you came back, well, who knows?
For now, beer's the gold and the neon glows
like a blast

furnace, and they've installed a micro-chip
in her bridgework for piping-in signals
at night. There's no work here, but the devil's.
Can you help?

J. Callin Oakes

RUNNING THE BULLS

The secret did not include our mother.
She had the heart of a bird
and let us feel it. The weakness there
was a pinhole of light
two moths fought to get warm by.

For this, we were not to tell her
we spent our summers in the bull pasture.
Understand, we were seven children
and lonely each to play
so small a part of the whole.

Some days we fought to be sick
and alone so she would lie beside us.
Winters, we jumped from rooftops
to snowdrifts, praying for just one
broken arm. Nothing.

Finally, we had to make the bulls
hate us. When they fell lock-kneed
into sleep, dumb with the size of themselves,
we'd thistle-whip some into waking. Sparks
from their eyes caught, then lit. We ran.

Each angry hoof carried the weight
of the herd as the earth threw us forward
fast. Somewhere ahead the fence was beyond
or under the dust. Behind, their breath,
frothed and hot on our backs.

Seven more steps: maybe we'd see
a brother thrown up and over the fence,
his hair like a banner and his hands
on his ass; perhaps a sister, clearing it,
barely. Whatever the end,
it would be pain with no sharing.
We took turns holding each other
to our chests to hear our hearts slam against
whatever walls we had to have between us.
Then we'd watch through fence slats.

Sometimes the bulls began to fight themselves
just for the blood of it.

**Harry Humes**

**Two Poems**

**POEM WITH A LINE FROM WALLACE STEVENS**

The stream looked lifeless, as if there'd never been fish
feeding next to a snag, never a snake
leaving a small wake.

As if no one had ever sat on the thick grass
watching water drifting through pools and riffles.

It was all stabbed by autumn's slanted light,
all the fish-minds stunted,
an entire season's brilliance of asters and gentian,
butterflies over the tops of the willows,
slowly underpowered.

That half-buried bicycle wheel
and sway of weeds,
those red leaves moving just under the surface.

An idleness, a stiffness of shadows
under the foot bridge
and where the water bent into the woods.

This distillation of sadness out of a long round promise.
This return to the plain sense of things.

**FROM THE APPLE TREE IN LATE OCTOBER**

Four deer, one with antlers
rubbed smooth against saplings.
They eat apples,
their jaws circling and grinding,
ear moving constantly,
listening for twig snap,
the brush of a sleeve against bark.

I could watch them the rest of my life,
teaching my children how to live
in such light as this,
to move just so through the world,
to learn how to sit still,
to notice everything,
to let nothing get by,
the musk glands inside the hind legs,
the swollen curve
of the buck's neck, his antlers dipping
as he sniffs the back of a doe,
branches cool and rough
against my fingers,
the dark pressing in over the pond,
and one of the deer suddenly balanced on its hind legs,
front feet tucked under its chest,
head stretched toward some rose-hip berries,
and above it an early star I don't know,
and this, yes, this need to have the deer vanish
on their own, not scared by me,
important that it happen that way,
and then my coming down,
everything intact, unchanged,
as if I had not been there at all.
FOR A FRIEND WHO SENDS ME A FLYER ON THE ART OF EAR CANDLING AND NEWS HER BOOK HAS ARRIVED

Could it be true? That a hollow taper, poised at the edge of an ear, ignited, sucks out years of “interesting contents”? Drawn by a narcissistic longing to see your own wax, would you risk a loss of hearing? Swabs, it says, are detrimental, cannot reach the depths. “Upon inspection,” would the flame extrude, in the form of mites, your mother the harbinger’s honey, the belt goes around your waist . . . blue side down; does your father’s yastupid dumba don’t give meany of your guff swell like fungus the size of a brain coral? What about his don’t be talkin, which lodged itself in a clump so thick (in the oval window? in the bony labyrinth?) it echoes with every word? What if it did loosen (gently, with crackling, with hissing) every fluid movement, every cumulonimbus-shaped incus vibration, every ounce of sound within thirty-three years of earshot? Could you have it pick and choose? Could you rig it, for instance, so it only softens the good stuff, the You, Yes, YOUs?! Could you have it skip the refusals, the let’s just be friends, Mr. Hoppel’s lawnmower drowning out the robins at dusk, Bobby Whitman’s Chevy the 99 times before it turned over? What is wax but food for flame?

And you’re waxing, Debi. This is the time to pick corn, Whitman’s “full-noon trill,” the time to let loose amber kernels of grief, your time to shine. Rolled in your ears the ancient waxing— Goddess Diana—rolled in your ears what’s kept our friendship incandescent (two cradled receivers, two lobed doubloons).

But “Oy!!!!!!!” your letter cries (every bird that sang singing again). How you heard stomping, a loud knock, then leapt for the door, how your voice gleamed over seven machines before it hit you: this is mine, this my own. Book you know like the lines ringing your mouth, lines of sound, vibrating bone. How small the part we see (squiggles and curlicues sway where a Q-tip never dreamed). One tube’s named for Bartolommeo Eustachio; there’s a vestibule, a stirrup, a drum (the mind flickers with all it cannot know); the tragus barely tells the prologue . . . .

I’m tempted, Debi—tempted to “feel a lightness in the head,” to use it as an ancient stenographer: “to write upon wax laid on boxwood, to form, with an iron stylus”:

OF COURSE YOUR EARS ARE BURNING!

But what if this candle did do damage? Turned rapport to purulence? Made what we’ve pigeon-holed disappear, left us with only the hoo-hoo of doves?

Notice how this Chris Coopens Coons, Certified Candler, makes no reference to sticking or spearing, to lancing or drilling, to dirking, plunging, forcing, or spiking, but mentions only “receiving” massage, “involving” the use of a candle . . . .

Nope. We can’t risk it. Can’t give up how we hear a song first (mother, father, yellow-rumped warbler . . . ), then rout out the body. Nor the chance to strain our ears for the heart of a baby long before he swims
the canal. Can't risk losing the riff and jam
of our whole-balla-wax, can't-hold-a-candle-to
jags, how like two Black Turbans we cling
to what's shaped up—held by the roar of the sea.

_Elton Glaser_

OSCILLATING FAN

1
Heat rises; cold comes down.
And yet we feel that hell
Is beneath us, and heaven somewhere
Above the high ice-crystal of the clouds.

2
Heat rises; cold comes down;
Humidity

Sticks in the middle
Where we live,

Air wrapped around us
Like the black shawl of Sicilian widows,

Or fingers on the windpipe,
The finishing touch.

3
Heat rises; cold comes down.

With a hitch, a palsy in the pulse,
The blades
Snick in a sour circle,
Bringing to a head
The dead breath of the day.

4
Heat rises; cold comes down.

Wheel in a wheel in a warm room,
The fan would
Scan the wet flesh,
Skin on skin, and stir
The white ring from a cigarette,
Pushing the smoke to a neutral corner.

5
Heat rises, cold comes down,
But fan can't
Make up its mind, any minute now
Reversing itself to no end
In a slow refusal of the absolute.
Whatever moves us

From east to west in an even sweep
Comes back again—
Groan of the ellipse, stalled orbit of the earth,

Eternal return always on the level,
But never north, and
Not south, not south, not south.
Preston Merchant

DEMONA, DAUGHTER OF THE LIGHTNING

This is no illusion—not flashpots at the stage edge, rumbling sheets of tin, and two boys with hand-pumps. There are no gods, no hypnotists. No one is pulling levers behind a curtain. There is only the sound of my voice calling the storms, and they come, furiously.

The show travels, and the other acts are popular but faked: "Dawn in Roseland" with girls as flowers unfolding in the rising sun—cardboard on a wire. "The Banquet of the Mermaids" with fans blowing crepe paper seaweed.

The other women do not understand me.

Men pay to see me. Some were told by their wives to go to hell, though I do not offer punishment but mystery. My father was a god, my mother a sulfuric acid bath. My resistance to the men's eyes heats the room. I am power. Measure me in ohms.

When I start, the tent shudders in the wind, and my eyes glow white, my arms and legs now electrified. Let no one dare to touch me—my fingertip could kill. My stomach is a turbine as I'm dancing in a rush of rain.

Within me and without, I conjure storms.

Pamela Gross

SPREAD WING/RED-SHAFTED FLICKER

Again and again, they unbind their drab robes, spread wide the wings' most astonishing lust-colored linings. They have fallen upon the needles of their own sharp cries; that's what all this red is about. Or maybe they only want us to look beyond the wings' curtained windows. To take down from our eyes hands pressed so hard a false garden explodes beneath closed lids. Minium, terra rosa.

The gnawed earth's names for red, laked here in the dark, and wasted on the bright, waking world. Maybe they urge us to turn our palms skyward.

To receive the untidy communion, the questionable gifts of this wholly unholy life. To stitch fast to our flesh the harsh, delicious itch that reminds each penitent there is something worth repenting: a garment, hidden, dyed gaudy. Stained the same startling stummel-shade of these wings' undersides, raised, all morning long, in their ongoing praise.
DEATHS

Memories of me will be stripped from you
like petals before winter.
First, it will be my footsteps.
I will go to where you sit in the park
but you will not look up.
Standing before you, my body
will cast a shadow on your paper.
You will not look up. Already
already you will not know that it is me.

Next, you will forget my voice,
and the sound of my breath as I sleep.
My greeting on the phone will earn:
Who is it? My cough on a crowded train
will not swivel your head.

Your nose will empty of my musk.
Your hand will lose my fit,
and my freckles will bleach from my arms.
My scalp will unclench my hair.
Then my flesh will fall from my bones,
even what we did, how you held me
in the fields of mustard grass outside Rouen.

Finally, all that remains will be the letters
of my name. I will live in them
frantically, those spider figures.
And only in your saying them will I exist.

Then you will cease to say my name.
The letters will not meet on your tongue.
They will go by as strangers on street signs;
the letters will flare, neon scribbles, outside cafes; the letters will go by on envelopes
spelling names that aren’t mine.
And there I will be, unraveled.
What is left,
what used to be me,
the scrawl of spider figures,
will then ascend
into some absurd
heaven, in the abstract
glory
of the alphabet.

ASKED FOR A HAPPY MEMORY OF HER FATHER,
A DAUGHTER REMEMBERS WRIGLEY FIELD

His drinking was different in sunshine, as if
it couldn’t be bad. Sudden, manic, he swung
into a laugh, bought me two ice creams, said,
One for each hand. Half the hot game I licked
Good Humor running down wrists.

My bird-mother
earlier, packing my pockets with sun block,
had hopped her warning: Be careful.
I held
his Old Style in both hands, pinned between
his knees; he streaked the cream on my cheeks
and slurred, My little Indian princess.

Home run:
the hairy necks of men in front jumped up,
thighs torn from gummy green bleachers to join
the violent scramble. Father held me close
and said, Be careful,
be careful. What did I know
of the need for care, with his thick arms
circling my shoulders, with a high smiling sun,
like a home run, in the upper right-hand corner
of the sky?
**David Wojahn**

Two Poems

STAMMER

One by one I lift them to the mouth, the tongue entwining them,
    the five smooth pebbles.
Speak now, speak now, say again.
Let the tongue know its place. This will, according to Herodotus,
    effect the cure for stammer.
Tongue contra world. Argot and glottal.
And memory, embalmed memory, is here as well.
    The speech correction teacher Mrs. N.
looming back to me this morning as my neighbor
in black Spandex cranks her Motown
up to ten, sunshine on a cloudy
day, in her yard as she lifts her hi-tech bow, and then
the target
    bristling arrows. Memory
of the tongue depressor, then its burrow
toward the tonsils. AH AH AH E E E,
good David good David good. Stereo
even louder now.
    Tempt, Four Tops
and Miracles, Cloud Nine Standing in the Shadows

of Love. *Talk when I say you can talk.*
Barnyard David barnyard.
    Bright grail

of R. Ruth rang Randy rarely. *Stop.*
Rarely randy rang. Rarely. Rarely. The stalled train of the tongue, steaming
engine. Engine on the railroad on the winter trestle
stalled. But then the grind and hiss and whistling.
I am speaking now I have permission.
Heat Wave, bull’s eye all the arrows bristle,
and she nods to herself. The tongue set free, the pebbles spit down.
Speak now speak now again again.

GALLERY IX: A CARVED BONE RING OF CORMORANTS
(Edo Period, 1650)

Under hard yellow light, under glass ablaze
and magnified, shaped and braided into wands,
how calm this surface, drilled and shuffled into clarity. Yet even clear looks deceive:
this ripple of incision, these hieroglyphs delicate as wing-beat strokes on snow,
represent instead the word erased, the word made flesh. Look closer and you see
the real text—a flock of twenty cormorants,
bills linked and circling the hollow bone,
my ladies, you are watching from the riverbank, as is the custom on these moonless nights.

You will see me hurl my cormorant, hear wingbeat and the sharp water-slap as prey is found.

You will, of course applaud this moment's evanescent majesty. O distant just Lord,

I will circle and return to you, my neck snapped back, dark water and the twitch of silver in my mouth.

The Woman Who Married a Bear

She had a lover whose eyes were shiny blue hooks luring her heart into the marsh of his body.
Then dragging her out again like a prize, a captive of his scars, his mother's blood.

She wintered on berries and thin plums, drank from a broth of maples and spruce, strung nets to snare brown mice and snakes.
While her lover groaned and slept.

She had a love whose fingers spun sticky webs. Who wove her nerves around his throat like pearls—a necklace of fat spiders and grubs,
moth wings fluttering against his skin.

Mornings she melted butter and grease in a black skillet over low flames. She gutted fish and scrubbed the flesh dangling from the bones like husks of fruit. Her lover rubbed against the current of her hips,
howled in gratitude and ate.

She had a lover whose voice pulled at the cords
coiled along her spine like a harp.
Whose dreamy hands arranged the black
veil of her hair until it shimmered with music.
Each strand a tiny river of sound
combed between his claws.

She scraped the rinds of green melons.
Crushed into pulp, pine needles and veined leaves.
Lit a fire to simmer the reeds and stems of summer grass.
Then braided a rug of feathers and straw
for her lover to rest on while he smoked.

She had a lover who spooned her body at night.
Who drank from the full cups of her breasts.
Who hungered for her shoulders, her mouth, her belly.
Who fed on the pounding in her chest.

In my hands, a hospital ship,
the one my mother spent the war on,
sailing soldiers home from Germany
who were lost in spite of being found,
who screamed into the night
that the needles were the enemy
or that they and they alone
bore gifts home from the gods.
If I tilt my hand, the ship
seems close to sinking,
but it didn’t on my mother’s watch,
so for her, I hold it steady,
make my hand into an engine
with the power to cross an ocean.
Inside, where I can’t see them,
are the crew, the people
who transform this ship,
this train across the water,
into a moving intricate hotel
where my mother loved her friends,
played piano and endless
games of pinochle, was happier
than she would ever be again.
So this is that I say—
if this is just a picture,
then life is but a comic strip,
a catalogue of nothing.
My mother is on board this ship,
there, where tomorrow
is mysterious and wherever
she is headed, she has not arrived.
14 METAPHORS FOR SEX (THE SEX THAT WE’RE NOT HAVING)

The Piano. Did you ever learn to play it?

Galleries and exhibitions. Monet bathed in moonlight. Sculptures with large, interlocking pieces.

How about a visit to a freak show? See the man who hammers nails right up his nose with a Kennedy half-dollar. Is it the lure of entanglement that persuades us? Or dissuades us?

Probably it’s just plain fear. What if we play the game and are beaten? In the last moments of the match, a single goal. 2-0, Brazil still loses.

Why not try a better ending? A school bus full of choir boys, driving fast toward heavenly perfection. Round dunes, a water fountain. Oil, drop by precious drop.

A woman named Doomed Pursuit. A man named Debutant. This isn’t working.

Gone the marabou, the fishnet, the tarty tricks of last year. This year’s all stainless steel or is it flat rolled carbon? Neck-high, rust resistant, totally non-oxidizing, a look that says—inade and you’ll be sorry.

Relax. Think cool tomatoes. Shadows down below, and quick the sliding door. It’s really much like caring.

Archipelagoes and men who fish. Rivers full of eels. Sheet rock, joists, bits of putty. If we do it this way, we might as well be married.

Think Paris for the weekend. This year, it’s Modern Languages, but I really don’t know German. In the war, they said. That’s where he really lost it.

If I never use the word, will you please fuck me?

Fruit flies and forbidden fruit. (I love you, say good night.)
had crustini and porcini.
At noon, what I eat are shoes,
what I drink is raw regret.
If that woman continues
to go on like that, I say
as if it’s someone else
who’s crying, I may
have to leave the room.

LIFE ON OTHER PLANETS

I remember falling down
the basement stairs. See the scars?
My mother saying be careful
of small dogs,
as if there were still room
to borrow trouble.
The view through
the screen door, winding lane
and spinning hubcaps.
In our living room, lived
only the piano.

I learned to rub
my hands along its curves
as if it were my body,
flatten keys to make
the most dissonant of chords,
the very sound that brought you
out of the city,
out of life on a street
I could not imagine.
You, the very thing
my mother feared too much
to even mention.

You were sex,
and it was sex that saved me.
Like a fast car

I drove out of my childhood.
Like a rocket
I took to leave the planet
I was born on, frozen world
where no one ever
touched me. And you ask
if I regret it?
See the earth below us,
cold blue marble—
the past is nothing
but a bed I used to sleep in,
little and alone.
In space, my fallen angel,
gravity is you.

Peter Cooley

MONUMENTS

Now, in my car, I am come to one
of the holy places: it is this tiny,
the moment in time beside my son,
ten years old this morning, riding beside me,
his day at camp minutes away. For now,
there is the music of his voice, off-key
accompanying my own to the car radio
blaring Country and Western. How soon I see
on the wind which carries this music and this car,
this season, this city, this country, this planet,
he will begin to leave me as my parents
aging quickly now are leaving me this summer
faster and faster. Moving, I say, I see it on the air.
All things in their permanence are still, written here.
Three Poems

BORDER WARS

ENDLESS JUNCTURE

One night I woke borderless.
I writhed and turned,
hoping to wrap the white sheet
into form, into body.
But there was only stillness
of the less-than-there:
vapor trail, unplayed air.

METEMPSYCHOSIS

In thick sacks in the hospital lab
the amputated limbs lay stacked.
Would you care to save the limb
for burial? the amputees were asked.
I stood by while my grandmother
said her dancing days were over.
The doctor stared at arms and legs
cut off, dancing into dust.

TRANSMORPHIFIED PAIN

To prove that my heart
did not ache, was impervious
to whatever pain he might try
to inflict, I unbuttoned my dress,
opened my breast, lifted out
my heart and held it in the flame
of the candle between us.
You’re bloodless he murmured.
I slid the heart back,
stitched the skin back up
finely as linen and spat: bad luck.

THE GODDESS OF CARPE DIEM

People die in their beds,
in water or air, under ground,
in the street. So why not covet joy:
full-bodied fruit, full-bodied light
touching the least-bodied insect or plant
cavorting with the wind, never thinking
Something is going to happen
or This is bound to end.

ARCHAIC REMNANTS

My mother kept the compact
high on the bathroom shelf,
its mirror cloudy with time and powder.
I crept in to open it, watch
the apple trees at the window
tilt and vanish, reappear.
My own face came to me in pieces.

THE FRAGMENT

The snake coiled, tail in mouth,
on the warm stone,
I was not frightened.
I felt pity, a need to cry out.
My mouth was not my own.

No Exit

I kept all the keys in a tin.
One by one they enter me: keys:
the room where my mother wept,
the attic where spiders fattened,
the cellar where my father slept,
bed where I keep opening.
I pass through borders at will.
And when people ask Who are you?
I open the tin,
I let them choose.

THE OLDER STUDENT'S STORY

In the war, he tended the wounded. He saw bodies torn open like packages from home. Sometimes he dreams about it, but he's not one of the ones who came home to wash his hands over and over. It was never on his mind like a woman he'd had and had to keep having, just to prove something—no, he wasn't wounded. But some of the wounds he saw were bad, bad, worse than the worst things in movies. They could have won the war if they'd gone all out, but instead the government let them get blown to bit like packages from home. He keeps coming back to that because one day, one of the last on his tour, he tended a boy whose wounds were crawling with ants, like somebody had left a box of sweets out in the open. Before he could get all the ants out, the boy died. He hardly thinks about it now. If he decided to write about O'Brien's "How To Tell a True War Story" for his essay, would it be okay to include his own experience? Or should he stick to the text?

MEDITATION INTERRUPTED BY BATS

No one knew how it happened, but one day the soul disappeared like a rumor. Only the poet was terrified enough to search for it. Standing on the back porch every night while the stars went on and the wind, the wind, what language was this, just on the edge of coherence. And inklike streaks overhead—bats, which were not dark souls, as the ignorant once believed. No, only think of that Nature special, the woman whose pet bat, hanging asleep from her collar, came to and crawled inside her blouse as she looked into the camera saying People spread all these rumors....

But we were on the back porch in search of the soul, rumored to be no more than rumor. Should we go down the steps, walk under the pines,
THE MESSENGER

Dickens gathered a handful of the loose leaves spread
cross the desk, and began to read. Inspector Field
followed suit. Not wishing to seem unobservant, I
did so as well.

— William J. Palmer

I didn’t want to hurt the boy, my age, my own
nefarious innocent tousle-headed eight years.
I didn’t want to, but I packed a stone,
about the size of a peach pit, in a grab of snow
tamped halfway into ice, and pitched it
—deficiently off-target by many degrees, I’d say
in my partial defense—along with the others.
That was the key: the others. “I did so as well,
not wishing to seem [you can fill in the blank].”
And he?—was one, in a circle of six or seven of us.
And we?—were something like a séance or a ring of coral,
that was the point, the whole point: being part
of what was larger. When he fled,
in a slippery dip below Woczek’s inadequate arms,
we simply turned our rifle on ourselves, and in that
winter melee I lost a mitten. That night,
the one remaining glowed in its dampness
etereally in a silvery wash of moonlight
on my wobbly bedside table: as its icy stiffness
melted, the insensate thing I’d been
that afternoon began to melt too: I was lost
in sleepless self-examination, in exactly what
community deflects us from: the solitary
sifting-ever-in: it’s what I’m doing now.
in writing this: and you, in reading: what the page
allows, that a computer network’s infiltrative,
outreach sensibility does not.
Since then, I’ve gladly and repeatedly immersed myself
in crowd-think, in the cellular belonging-to-a-body
I call “throngitude”—to not at times
Cats: a clowder. Bees: a swarm. These names
for likened multiples delight us:
a pride of lions, a murder of crows, a leap of leopards,
(Wild felines—tigers, lions—rub against each other
daylong, that the odor of their particular group becomes
I.D.). Of humans: a huddle; a ‘hood; a POW camp;
a parish; an orgy; a phone-a-thon; a hobo jungle;
a romp; a skirmish; a 12-step program;
a bogged-down, brown-faced, blisterful committee. Even
here, however, individuation can’t be stayed;
and when the whole tent falls to its 2,000 knees,
in atremble devotion, someone will be doubtful.
John writes: “I always love those pictures of the bull
jumping out of the bullring: the people in the stands
have such interesting looks on their faces, ranging
from terror to astonishment to complete oblivion.” Not
to mention the matador’s suddenly wilted elan. Nine
hundred (anyway, that’s the feeling) guys
at the stage of the topless bar, and one
artiste with the one glitzed strip of cloth the law demands,
in her circle of pink light: Tara: I buy her a drink.
“You think I mess men’s brains around? My sister’s
a neurosurgeon.” I imagine her great auteur capability
and loneliness, as a dozen attendant nurses moil
like water around a rock. Somewhere someone
is always aloof from the flow. A circa 1855
folk painting that I like consists of a goofily portly,
stylized angel overhead—in search of some person
to change, by its disturbing intervention. There isn’t an element
of this scene with correspondence in the lives
of us who view it; even the cloudbanks are an impossible sweet cream
paradigm. And the angel: so replete with its wisdoms!
—one blue mitten adrift in the sky.
HOW WE SPENT OUR TIME ON THE PLANET

In between grieving and falling in love
there were hours, whole months kill,
testing our weight on ice we knew was thin
but not that thin, stuffing our pockets
with pinecones, wondering how the cat
would look viewed through the holes
in a crumpet. We dedicated a certain portion
of our lives to sliding our feet into other
people's mukluks, to seeing how long
we could balance a book on our heads
or how loud we could whistle. Not
that we ever imagined anything would come
of it. No, we knew we'd evolved, elbowed
our way out of that sea where bubbles
get blown just for the fun of it, stopped chasing
each other up trees and shocking the jungle
with meaningless laughter. We had a few
good ideas about time — witness the scorn
some of us held for those counting angels
on pins, playing games with hybrid peas
while the rest of us worked hard:
scrubbing linoleum, spit-shining chrome,
trading in futures or trying to divine
what rhymed with purple. We weren't interested
in what didn't get results (though we'll admit
we walked around on beaches, got drunk,
looked at stars), and so, now, here we are:
hanging around on a cloud bank and imagining
just how sorry certain people must be
that they don't have us to kick around
anymore, huddled together now down there
and trying, for the very first time in their lives,
to deserve us: miraculous creatures
they should have never doubted us to be.

THE GEOGRAPHERS HAVE LOST THEIR WAY

Tiny in hardhats against the cliff's sheer face,
they spread out maps and kneel together
on the canyon floor. They can't agree on substance,
can't give the mound of rock they've crouched upon
a name, adamant as cranium, cupping
the natural curve of the earth.

Since daylight's all at once at closure, a martin sails
over the basin of relative dusk toward home.
They pause in their study to chart is coordinates,
points that diminish in ellipses
as it wings itself further and further away.
The chart's of little use since the figures of the landscape
keep changing, and though the map hurries
to represent rivers that yawn into seas,
mountains that evaporate and reappear as rain,
there's a certain delay. Light moves so slowly
here, takes millions of years to convey old news
from the nearest galaxy's nearest star. It's hard
to explore when the mind keeps changing
its mind about crevasses, abandons itself
among scrub brush, takes itself off to another place.

The geographers return as second thoughts. The moment
they know where they are, they are gone again, helmets winking
in the spray near waterfalls, tracking the eye
to a vanishing point in the aether that seems stray.

One of them pauses to wonder if they are the problem
with distance, negotiating by starlight,
making shady deals with heavens and expecting what's been put
somewhere to stay — but for now their first concern
will be the spot they're standing on,
and whether or not they'll locate themselves
in this watercourse of criss-crossing streams,
this microscopic seam in the twilight: teeming, prolific,
antameable empty space.
CONSOLATIO

In the end they were left with nothing
but God. He lay like a bottomfish
in still water, not moving a fin.
It was as if all rooms conspired
to miraculous vacancy: centuries connected
by corridors, endlessly corrugated,
the echoes resounding at the doorsills,
Leaving so soon? Everything wanted
to say nothing in particular, petroglyphs
of every eye, this divided eye, sightless
representative. They shielded
their brows from what brightness
they could continue to imagine.
Light blew over the earth.
Atomic weights regained their prominence.
Relativity flickered against cave walls.
Their shoes were rocks, not dancing.
not shining. No moon tonight,
they might have said, as if to say
that every moon was new, not the same
old stone, its loyalties all given over
to gravity. Over the waters light arrived,
kept arriving. They said, God, meaning,
we are tired or disgusted, meaning,
at the same time,
what on earth are we to do?

FIRST SIGHT

It's out in the garden, the body
of belief, picking the answers
to its questions. Barefoot
through bee-teeming rows
of delphinium stalks, metronomes
clocking the delicate breezes, it keeps
nothing back, tells you everything
it knows: dizzying bluebells,
puerile dirt, a pulse of rose
flushed under the wrist. Your heart lifts
like a leaf. Aphids flit for the pleats
in the peony, restructure dust to the motes
of known flight. Out in the heat,
the body drones, drowses half way through
its story, sweetens its memory
with clover. For no reason, it laughs
aloud. It says, whatever ails you,
it's love, says it was thistle-grass
scratching your ankle, says the lilacs
are the color of lilacs and blood
is part salt. It doesn't care
what happens, and light glances
off the greenhouse and the green scent
of the garden is ancient, already
condemned. This is one-sided
dialogue: the foxglove's pollen-coated
throat mused into a paw, insects sown
wide, live as the grass. The body listing
through the morning doesn't listen.
How soft they feel, young raspberry
leaves stained with the blush
of crushed fruit. There's the rasp
of the wasp in the thicket:
damn the alleles
of these suppliant days,
wrong from the first sight,
bright hum and quickening.
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Poetry Northwest is in its thirty-sixth year of uninterrupted publication. Unlike a distressingly large number of American literary magazines, it has not disappeared, altered its format, or curtailed its quarterly appearances under the stress of increased printing costs and higher postal rates. It continues to publish the best poetry it can find. The University of Washington is supporting it to the limit of present resources, but in spite of our increased circulation and a recent increase in our subscription price, there remains a substantial gap between our income and our expenses. Our readers have helped generously in the past. Their contributions have kept us going. Won’t you please join them? Gifts to Poetry Northwest are tax deductible.

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David Wagoner
Editor