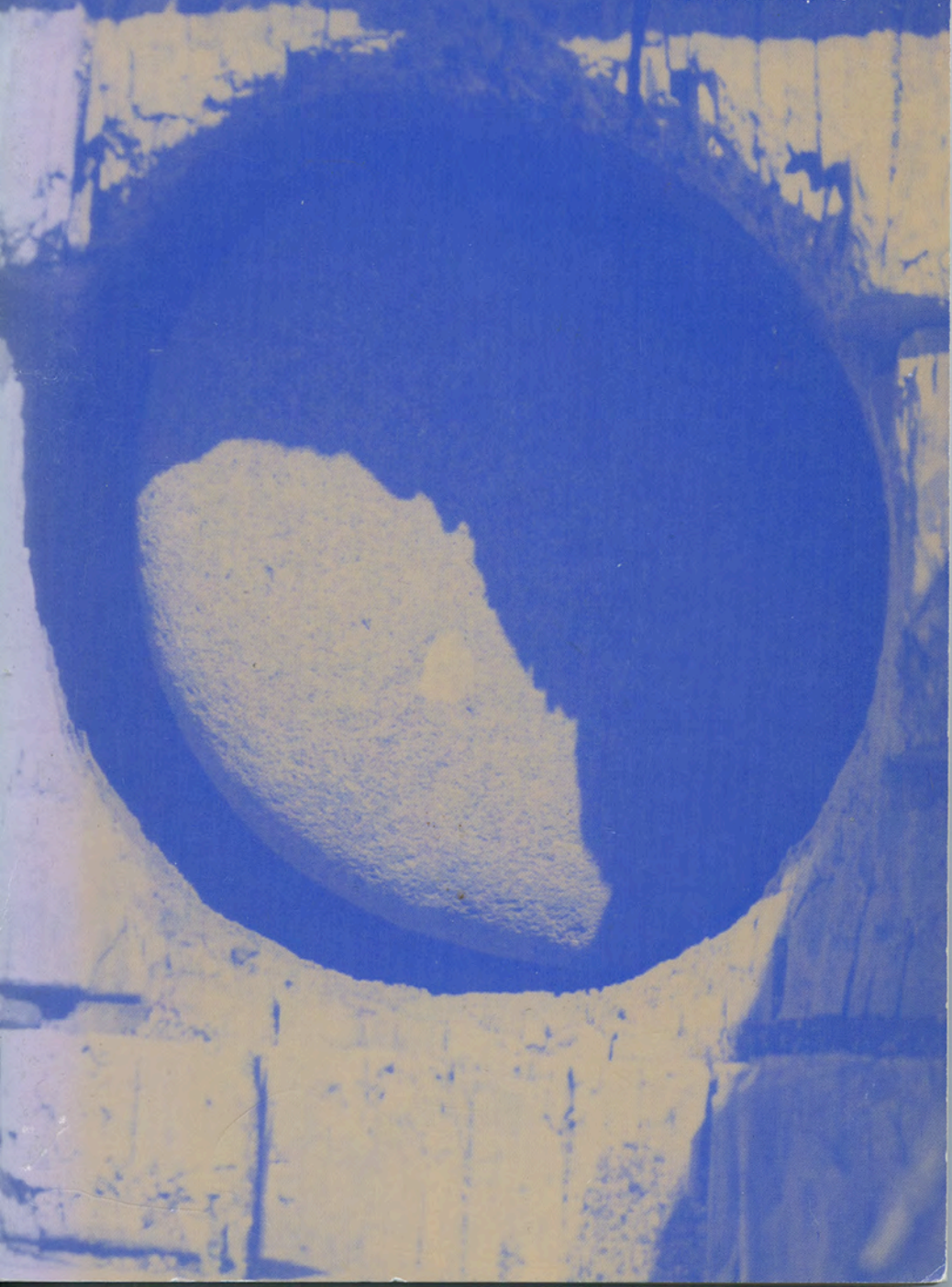


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NORTHWEST



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POETRY NORTHWEST

AUTUMN 1996

Robert Wrigley

Three Poems

SAD MOOSE

He's shed his left horn and lists
to the right, working the last one
hard against trees and stones.
An old bull, his dewlap's shot
with white, his winter hide
shelving off like crumbling shale.
High on the brisket there's a wound,
oozing and festered, the fletched end
of an arrow worn down but visible still.

He's carrion on the hoof. There's a bear
nearby, I'll bet, or a lion.
The howls of last night's coyotes loom
explanatory today, one pack's in line,
another one's on the way.
Though half the pond is iced over,
alga's there, some new moss
and the translucent shoots
of the earliest aquatic weeds.

Besides, isn't the bone oar
above the right ear lighter there?
Each day for a week I've watched him,

the ribs defined into claws,
 a slow strangulation in his own
 stout bones. "Stout bones," I say,
 aloud, and the submerged head
 comes up dripping, an arc splash
 flung by the antler.

In two tremendous leaps, he's battering
 the brush between us, and I'm
 shinning up a lodgepole no bigger
 than my thigh, pulse pounding
 counterpoint to his moosely abandon.
 Ten yards of deadfall and alder
 and he's still. I'm slung among
 bird perches and looking down
 at forty-five degrees into his eye.

It's the upward eye, the extant
 horn on edge, down against a fallen snag
 like a kickstand. He's a pentapod,
 the eye from this angle
 blue-black and cloudy, like motor oil
 laced with milk. Five more minutes
 and he's back in the water
 and I'm down, picking my quiet way
 through duff and dead branches to the trail.

This morning when I left the cabin,
 I considered the pistol there.
 In my jacket pocket, five bullets
 rattle like beads. Fire, I think,
 and language, possibly love.
 I have these things a moose does not.
 Sad moose, sad man. Sad is the world
 a while, as it waits to feed,
 some of us seed and tendril, some of us stone.

COUNTRY & WESTERN

If you could line the broken hearts up
 end to end, AM and FM,
 the benzedrine laments of long-haul
 truckers, warbled bleatings of cowboy blondes,
 and the bland aphorisms of professional white men,
 you'd have yourself the carnage of a war
 even the most rabid militiaman could not swallow.
 But sometimes, when I find myself under stars,
 an endless two-laner paying into the lights
 and the broken white line ticking off
 minutes by the mile, I will sometimes endure
 the pure paranoia and hatefulness
 of the worst son of a bitch
 who ever cashed a corporate check,
 just to hear Merle Haggard, or Patsy Cline,
 or maybe George Jones. And once,
 on the curved canyon road down
 from the Bitterroot Range, I kept catching
 and losing an all-night blab and ballad show
 from Vegas, some smug thug of a d.j. raging
 for a fence at the Mexican line.
 He took a call from an up-river Idaho town,
 where I would myself be in fifty minutes,
 and by some miracle of starlight
 and impenetrable stone, satellite
 technology and a twenty-five mile per hour turn,
 I missed everything my fellow citizen said
 after "niggers," then emerged
 into the long straightaway below Bald Mountain
 just as a steel guitar gave way
 to the vocal. The highway itself turned
 ironic then, and I was laughing. It was Charlie Pride
 singing, black pearl in the oysterbed of Caucasia,
 and if the airwaves were ridden low
 by fools one moment, then they were
 lifted up the next by song, although
 I hadn't gone two hundred yards
 when the ache of what he sang came down

on me, and then the pain of how
he sang it, one more broken heart
on the way to anywhere, and everything else,
all but the blessed, painful music
was gone.

INVENTORY

April 2, 1996

The clappers in the yellowbells allure,
plush with pollen, and the year's
first bees blunder up, such down-
cast blossoms an aerial feat in April.
Mullein's come on, leaves soft
as a dog's ear, the dog's ears
pricked forward, hearing, seeing that way,
feeling each scent in her skin.

Silver petals of ice bloom
in the toe and heel pads
of a bobcat's track, a trail of half-flowers.
Wild strawberry babies, bearded
with frost, and elaborate brambles
of black cap canes, still unrisen from winter.
The thrums inside are sparrows.

Among a small herd of Herefords, four elk.
Skull of cow, bird bones,
a great horned owl sleepy in a hollow snag.
Sun prised through wet pine needles,
and balsamroot shoots, so fresh,
so tender, so burnished by dew
they look sautéed, caramelized in the butter of ice.

Bear scat, cow flop, pellet of deer,
elk turds, a wild rose leafing out, bangled
with hips. The wind sigh of the creek,
the wind, the distant river glinting.
A woodpecker's code, a tick

on my leg, a chorus of anonymous bird songs,
one quick squawk saying "Who?", then "Me!"

Trees and shrubs shed their snow in the sun,
the dog begs a wedge of apple, when,
from behind the tree I lean against,
from a thicket of sumac and rose,
a covey of quail explodes—
delicate thunder that freezes me
but sends the dog, in two strides and a leap,
into the air, where
she stretches out, a long elegant arc
only inches behind a bird
and gaining, taking flight.

Irving Feldman

Two Poems

CAME TO NOTHING

The waiting in the rain that came to nothing
...or nothing more than a row of parked cars
and a newspaper growing damper...—this
wet withering I recollect better
than all one summer's entire garden
run wild to spend itself in what seemed
monthslong coupling now run together.

TWO WAVES

And then for one moment
the circle held firm around it:
closest to the center they were falling back
in horror, while those who were farthest off
kept pressing forward to see.

Floyd Skloot

ARGENTEUIL, 1894

As summer sun stipples the garden grass,
Monet is watering his roses. Camille sits
in the noon light, chin on hand, white dress
a pillow for young Jean who no longer fits
across her lap. Missing the city, she
is ready to pack right now if only Claude
could tear himself away. But of course he
wants to spend time painting with Edouard,
and Jean, half-asleep, is already talking about
having a picnic tomorrow. It is always
like this. Now Claude has brought his paints out
to sit beside Edouard and work till day's
end. At least he is turned away from her.

She sees what will happen even before
Pierre arrives. There is no wind to stir
the air, no cloud to change the light; what more
could they hope for? These are men who would paint
their wives on death-beds if the light were right.
Camille smiles and shifts Jean so that his weight
is off her thigh. Oh, they will eat fish tonight,
a red mullet or, better still, fresh eel,
only in her dreams. Perhaps they should
eat this cock and hen clucking at their heels.

After the last Salon, of course the men would
need something like this, a slow summer to
paint their hearts out, a blossoming of sheer
joy together. So there is nothing to do
but hold still in the heat and be here
with all one's heart—perhaps a quick flutter
of the fan to keep Jean calm and herself
fresh—as time slows and the men, in utter
concentration, begin to lose themselves

in the closed circle of their art and Manet
paints the Monets in their garden as Monet
paints a grinning Manet painting the Monets
in their garden and Renoir paints the Monets
in their garden in the summer in Argenteuil.

Jesse Lee Kercheval

THE STAGE AS BARE AS POSSIBLE

I

It is winter, the lighting
dark as drying blood.
Center stage,
the trap door opens
and a bodiless grief appears,
fresh from that other world,
and it is you.

I listen, all ears, to hear
that sound, that old cough,
cold and scraping
as a miser counting change,
that took you from this life.
I call your name, but hear in reply
only beating wings. Then someone
brings the house lights up
—*intermission?*—
and it is day again.

II

It is spring now, a sound like rain,
wisteria is falling.
The prop man hurriedly arrives
carrying boxes from the wings:
a furnace to melt my heart,

tea—Celestial Orange—
to serve in tiny Russian glasses.
Why build a house,
you would have said,
if not to bake bread, welcome guests,
have a life once more?

As I watch
the light inside the house
grows bright, then brighter.
Without aiming
I shoot toward happiness,
nearly myself again.

III
Fall. The rain comes harder,
washing the streets
and sidewalks clean.
Humans can rarely be so perfect.
A large bird,
you fly through my house
on the odd occasion,
leaving feathers fluttering
across the hardwood floors.

I hear you cough
less often, life
a habit you have broken.
Even in this last act,
I still love you,
but this play has such a simple plot.
You were alive
and now you're not.

Lynne Knight

BED AND BONE

I can't wait to sleep in my own bed
I kept saying, sometimes to no one,
sometimes as provocation

to be left alone, so by the time
I came home and unpacked, I half
expected the bed to rise in greeting

like a lover, but it just lay there, dumb,
flat, I saw it wouldn't take off
so much as a sock if it were a man,

I would have to do everything,
but I went to it anyway, smiling,
beyond shame, I lay down and sighed

to my bed, that shifted a little as if afraid
I might weep, as I sometimes did,
but not now, now I was about to sleep

in my bed when suddenly I saw
how it would look like other beds
stripped of its covers, as I would look

without my hair and flesh—
and it was then, dear friend,
that grief took hold and shook me

back to that summer in Ithaca,
when, tired of *Ulysses*, we'd walk
from the dorm to stand below the waterfall,

dazed by how quick all passage is.
Bed to bone to nothing.
Mine, then gone.

William Olsen

EXPLOSION

Here is the injury that's impossible to see.
Here is the eye-gauzing light before the bandages,
the fire before the light, the flash before the burn,
the deafening instant, domesday mortar and pestle, just as I
left it.
Here is the universe still getting over itself.
Here is the explosion I have tried to stop wearing.
Here is my face, my adolescent face, my ear-splitting
homemade face, my face blown dark-side moon-pock,
the detonated homemade power blowing up my face.
I can hear gunshots and squealing tires: the rec room tube.
My father's voice—*o no o no o no*—each word drawn out
into one of those rags that yogis stuff through one nostril
and pull out another to cleanse the nasal cavities.
Filth and corruption begin to sob for me
and my agony begins to be heard though vaguely,
the family by now some crazy island of crying trees—
all mixed up are my father's bottomless sobbing,
my brother's ghastly logical voice, my Mother of Worry's
unutterable voice.
Down the driveway solid yet tipsy as a pirate plank,
to our car, half-melted soap shape; I can't see all I couldn't
see—
it's singed, wan, selfish, ineducable, adolescent, Satanic.
They wrap me up for two weeks with the face of a mummy;
family coming and going to it, looking and not looked at
by it:
then good night: the nurse's breath a cold steel furniture—
Will I remain there and rule, laid out, sheeted? It's almost
back. . . .
The *wasn't*. The hospital light with the blindfold on.
And why must they wrap up my face? It can't see.
The faces: no faces. Voices forced to be bright for me.
All the blinding light of the universe they couldn't face, could
I?

Somebody's hand would lower as far as my cheek
and a voice would have to tell me whose—
down there where I still can't see the faces—
each voice standing out from all the rest,
totally strange—and the darkness keeps us talking.

Len Roberts

ANOINTING HER FIVE SENSES

for S.R., 1898-1973

Each morning she'd
drop a Milky Way or Three
Musketeers,
with some piece of fruit,
apple, plum, peach, pear,
the twenty feet between
us nothing but blue
air
as we'd both wait that
split-
second to see if I'd
catch
what was tossed with
my free hand, not missing
once,
as I remember it, reaching
out, sure, even now when
the priest asks
*Are there any sick in your
house?*
and dabs her head with the
sign
of the cross, the last
putting on of oil for
her closed eyes and

stitched lips,
 for her ears that had
 curled to every word
 I'd whispered
 up those cool 6 a.m.'s
 just above the rattle of
 cars down cobblestones,
 a dab, too, for her nose
 that could tell
 exactly when the cake was
 done,
 chocolate thick in layers
 she'd wrapped in cellophane
 just once for our most dangerous
 toss,
 small cardboard plate
 like a flying saucer that
 zagged
 the air but never once
 turned
 upside down, shining
 there in my palm
 like this chrism
 smudged
 on the tip of her nose
 with the priest's words
to heal the body and soul
 of the sick
 my eyes risen still to
 that window
 where she would sit,
 my hands half-
 lifted in that small room
 of her death
 to catch, again, her morning
 gift.

Albert Goldbarth

HIDDEN TRAJECTORIES

Fly Girl, Dr. Devil Pants, and Johnny & his Noise Boys
 are The Decibulls, and all they do—and all
 they *want* to do—is practice music for their debut demo
Hula Skirt on Fire, all they want to do is lose themselves
 beyond all reclamation in that jillion-watted joy, until
 their amps fry, and their brains pop,
 and the peeling gingerbread trim of the garage
 unbelts itself from the slatting and flies into space,
 then they want to do it some more: cacophonous but mainly
 innocent pleasure. Because of them, I thought of Buddy

when a '91 Toyota zoomed out of the Quik Trip lot
 directly into my equally speedy '89—a frightening
 but perfect curve it made to meet me head-on,
 just as if we'd planned this graceful violence (worthy
 of the Joffrey or the Bolshoi) over months; and not unlike
 a marriage crashing, when it comes to seem two strangers
 each spent thirty years in the grip of a hidden trajectory
 meant to bring them to exactly this collision. So I sat
 amidst the sirens and the screamings of what struck me
 as the x-point of a predetermined wreckage. Clamor,

yes, sure: 911 vans, and local news, the works. But
 at the moment I saw the oncoming car, two seconds
 in duration, time became a nonchronological bubble
 of endlessness and silence. This is something of what Buddy
 tries for, meditating, mantra-humming, fasting: quiet
 and purity. I remember his story: "That summer
 I moved uptown. It seemed a pretty block,
 and placid. I was unpacking, and looked out the window,
 and I remember thinking: hey, look at these cool kids
 walking into that garage with the gingerbread trim."

Erin Malone

FOR RAINY

The frog
in the garden
is huge.

We've never
seen him,
but his voice

sounds the house,
punctuates
dinner talk

with its wet
guttural urge
to repeat.

We've looked
everywhere
by the small

tiled pool,
the tool shed,
the lemon tree.

Quietly
we cross the threshold
to the yard:

the slightest
bird-cry
from the screen latch

will silence him.
He watches, smug
in his withholding

but good. We
soak the lawn,
staring when

the dark comes up
green
and ankle-deep.

David Hilton

Three Poems

WARMTH

The liquid glowed thick
in the cold morning in
the glasses purple-frosted
with pinup girls and storks.

Lipstick kissing the rims,
cigarette butts leaching amber
in the sweet oily bottom
sips of the highballs,

manhattans, collins, sours—
and the crusty-eyed boy
in pajamas that mittened his feet
drank them all down in turn.

Thus he warmed himself
before having to reach the long
wire rod with the match at the tip
down through the heat grate

to try to light the pilot—
and this way, too, he helped
straighten up the house
before they moaned and awoke.

17020 VIA PASATIEMPO

How such a little box could hold
sly fifths of I.W. Harper,
one mange-bald mutt, a ten-year-old
tapping the walls for exits; add
great slabs of emptiness like stone
ashes hardened by his mother's
tears—contain such debris of lives
crowding his head, and kid brothers
no less, love not letting him alone—

I cannot grasp now. Forty years
of faked deaths gone (pick one: eighteen,
drunk, bopping on a roof-edge, beers
swinging both hands, blacked-out, he fell,
four stories up, *back* on the roof—
so friends, when he came to, told him),
and I'm parked again at the curb,
outstaring that house, stucco scrim
wavery in the sun, demanding proof

(beyond treacherous, fitful cock-
memory) I didn't just *occur*
as randomly as the wild rock
garden now litters the gone lawn—
bleached gravel "bed" for castles, elves,
windmills, burros, pagodas, gnomes.
All refract in the plastic sphere
atop mystic cone, swirling selves
into the froth of fragmented poems.

So I wait, if ghosts can meet, for
the asthmatic shade of a boy,
"smart for his age," out the bent door
(creaking slow, gothically as hell)
to escape and enter me. Scare
strange neighbors peeking through their blinds—
I'm the spectre now, heavy, gray
rental-car lurker. Nothing binds
me here, except—worn-out, bland—terror.

OLD DRAFTS

In a hand now strange
over virtual payrus
wine-blotted (what

was I drinking
through those keep
gone nights?—cheap

half-gallons no doubt
and sweet, thicker so
with alcohol)—

broken-lettered, blotched
with unspeakable encrustations,
who knows what brilliant

riffs and goofs X'd out
when the typewriter
lurched in my eyes like a man

drifting off the shoulder,
swerving back—oh, it was all
really very bad stuff and

heaps of it thrown out
in fits of purification,
vain attempted removals

to new lives. Yet these few
saved in a scuffed black
spring binder (of a design

so perfect for young poets
it's no longer made) gave
at their coming into being

crazy joy
better than sex
and good as drugs, abandon

equal to the rock'n'roll
always playing loud
at the instant of their creation.

And I was as much then
as now—as even now,
my linguistic prowess peaking—

no, much more then,
the poet, driven
to tears or hilarity

by lines I could not believe
I had made, phrasing
and rhythms accountable

only to the visitations
of wild gods. But truly
very bad it was—

perhaps a small hempen
sack of images
like Sapphic shards

would not now humiliate me,
no more than this
to hold from a writing life

not so cut short as Keats',
indeed surpassing Shelley's,
which went on and on and did not end

until the thought hit me
Shouldnt I know what I'm doing?
No longer proclaiming

my season as America's
great surrealist, no longer
abject before my master

of the moment, I range
new poems before me
on my immaculately

malleable disc,
every printing perfect,
every copy professional

and impossible
to tell apart
from the original.

Michael Spence

THE ROBERT FROST INTERPRETIVE TRAIL, VERMONT

—for Sharon Hashimoto

His lines are stamped into the squares of metal
Gray and scarred
That stand where the path curves—as though his words
Have bent the trail.

These plaques like roadsigns lead us down a route
Into a mind
That listened to the silence of this land
And gave a throat

To all the speechless things. I feel the sting
Of the red juice
Biting a chokecherry: such bitterness
Could sharpen any tongue.

Every five years, the ones who tend this place
Burn a field
To stop the woods from coming back. We're told
This is the price

For keeping it the meadow he wrote about.
The hobblebush
Has taken over, but the ranks of birch push
Against its limit.

As we approach a slow stream, I remember
The Northern Lights.
We saw them for the first time last midnight—
A glowing border

Between the treeline and the black of space,
As if the stars
Nearest to the earth had fused together.
High above us,

Above the ghost-veil rippling like a flame
We couldn't feel,
The night was tacking up its animals
One star at a time.

Looking down at the stream, I see a glint:
A small frog
Drifting in dark water, still as a twig.
Three points

On its head are all the sunlight can catch—
Its snout and eyes
The only constellation in a sky
We can touch.

Gordon Grant

MERCHANT OF YELLOW ROBES

It is the word foreign
we need, accent on emperor
fields like the prince's nephews
reclining lemon and amethyst,
the weather distant through
imperial trees: in all
what will never be us, that celestial
habit, ancestors, robes
which tell as they slither
green dragons, north wind
the hills inclined toward summer
encampments of marvels
syllables meaning nothing to us
and are the whispers of hosts.
What commerce of strangers' silence
might break open spilling huger
silks, our goods
become gods in our hands, more
swollen with heaven that we knew
so we could hardly lift them
as we say in our own blunt
rockfall of words to those faces
arrayed on the other hills
here, we have brought you
this shackled chest no
it is not your tea like smoke
your jade birds nor oxen
we want will you exchange for it
wildness it is your eyes
like civilized animals we tremble
before in your robes like morning
will you not descend from the towers
of your glances?

SHOTS FROM THE BEST ROLL OF FILM

Prickly pear in bloom and a hand-built chair
splintery as fence posts

The blur of two deer

Sun shafts between sycamores

Roots holding stones out of the water
where we went in

What we called Hippopotamus Rock
side-hollowed limestone
eye-deep in the swimming hole

Cactus in a crevice of tree
like a thorned bird's nest

What looked like frayed rope but
was a snake skeleton
flesh unravelling

A small pelvis
like a ritual mask
stained green and faintly crimson
I looked through it

Ripples cast shadows of color on our skin
Fingerling minnows mouthed our knees and thighs

The camera fell in

SAY WHEN

Say you were a genius of the domestic:
spare closets, papered shelves,
cans rotated in the pantry
and leftovers fresh as Lazarus.

Say the dust defeated you,
spiderwebs flaring on the hot saucepan;
wasps droned on under the porch,
the broken step you stepped over
with the wash,
the fig tree crowding the line.

Say you had a hammock tied to the tree
and only Sundays to lie down
and get the laundry done.

Say you lay down,
dreams urgent as prayer
as the wind wound you in sheets from the line.

Say you died in your dream
and woke convinced you were in paradise. Or hell.

Say it doesn't matter.

Say you don't know what you want.

You will when it's gone.

ANYWHERE, NOW

This is Clifford, agonist about the neighborhood,
one eye bulging imperceptibly inward, the other out,

cathartic around the house, acute for things unheard,
hunched into his right to enter anywhere, now,

track his personae into their secrecies, their passage
to the ninth mortal state, the twenty-first, the third,

and learn what it is they must do, must say.

Here are Marvin, Alicia, Bo, auditioners at all hours,
bearded, undulating, Mississippian, ingenious of face,

crafty of idiom learned in the streets, the night,
from Uncle Edgar, Sophocles, the woman on the train,

impetuous for the leap of empathy, the moment of abandon,
for discovering dark necessity in scenes as they are

and in their voices what they do not know they know.

These in a darkened house
are the boards, .
deserted,
their history razed,

bared to the silence,
to afterthought,
bridal music,
gunfire,
fragments of soliloquy,

alert to a rustling in the wings,
to the cunning of the light,

the clamor in the distant
streets,

all the stories that ever were.

HERE IS A MAN

back to a wall in the cafeteria
having the meat loaf plate
who only a few hours ago
coming across on the ferry
felt lines from infinite planes
converging upon him

who on the way over from the shop
through the public temper
no crease in his pants
pausing in the green space
across from the courthouse
felt boundless compassion for God

SOME SPEAK ICELANDIC

Some twitch in their sleep.

Sell orchids and parrots by the roadside.
Attack the piano like manic spiders.

Some smuggle hashish across the desert.
Go disguised as homemakers
in Dublin suburbs, in Jerusalem's alleys,
near the rise where the last caribou was sighted.

Some are going to pieces in the tropics,
in the Urals, in deepest Manhattan.

Some lean into their machines.

Some can sit alone and content in their rooms.
Have fits of systemization

on the sampans, on the banks of the Platte,
not far from the house where Koestler
and his wife took their lives.
Write their best letters on trains.

Squat on the outskirts of Brasilia.
Deny that a taste for the sublime

is a greed like any other.

Gregory Djanikian

IN THE HOSPITAL ROOM

He has been talking to her mostly about food,
maybe to distract her, or trick her body
back into health, or maybe because
he has always loved talking about it
and she has loved hearing him.

He is whispering to her now
of their anniversary dinner two years ago,
the grilled squab on a bed of mango slices,
the nine-spiced dumpling which surprised her
with its hundred corners.

There is a whirring of machines in the next bay,
bubbles are rising in one of many tubes.

He is remembering for her the *Côte-d'Or* in 1957,
the *potage royal* embroidered with dill,
the truffles en cassoulette, he is
describing the Medoc in which simmered
the sweetbreads of two angus calves.

Each time he reconstructs any one of five sauces
he brings his hand to his heart

as on his wedding day
as if a great veil had suddenly lifted.

But how much uncertainty has accumulated here
like invisible clouds around everyone!
And the doctor with his charts and percentages
and the intercom blaring, "Number 4, please, number 4."

Maybe tomorrow the lucky skies
will have opened up for them
and ten-thousand raindrops fallen for joy.

Maybe it will go on like this for most of the evening:
she listening intently, nodding her head yes
to the memory of sea urchin and yellowfin,
hummingbird soup and chicory leaf

while nurses whisk in and out
and the gurneys in the corridor
glide by like boats

and his low voice wrapping around her now
with *vol-au-vent au poisson*, *calamari fritti*,
and the checkered tablecloths lightly rising

in the breeze, the white linen napkins,
such delicate violets painted on each plate.

Christopher Howell

STORY TIME

What is this about? I ask, holding
the book
up to my son's shining face.

Again he doesn't answer, so I say, "See
the lonely robin
wants to talk with the worm

but the moon is like a train, too loud,
the clouds
have all run off over the big sky."

"Yes," he says, "space ships and
the magic bus
and *night* comes into *moon*."

"But the robin, on the next page
he's flying. Why
won't he stay with his friends?" I ask

gently, but he's through with me now.
His hands ascend
like wind-blown leaves in search

of the Milky Way of sleeker, more loyal
birds, where
no one is autistic and no huge people

live in sadness because of the boy
who looks at them
and calls out strangely, and cannot say

the perfect words they long to hear.

Jeff Gundy

RAIN

And a stray face spins me back to the black-haired girl
I saw long ago and stood helpless
watching her pass, bareheaded in the rain,
the easy way she found, wet but not hunched
against it, hair damp and shining on her brow,
her shoulders. I wanted to give something
for the dark rain of that hair,
the quiet of her face, not angry or restless,
alert to each step, the crowded sidewalk...
But what? Words? Dark rain. Wet face.

She never saw me. We've tramped on down
our own dark tunnels now for years. What hapless watcher
at my gates would know her face, would let her in
without the password, find her a bed, say rest,
sleep, I'll be outside?

I know. It shouldn't matter
who's lovely in the rain and who isn't.
But it's not beauty or nostalgia or even lust
that's got me, I don't know what it is,
justice maybe, prisons and churches, the glowing creatures
in the center of the sun. Most days I think
I'm almost free, I don't miss a single meeting,
I don't hit squirrels with my bike. Most days
it doesn't rain, and nobody walks the streets
in black hair, a light jacket and a glaze
of shining water, rain beading and touching her
all over like the hand of someone very large
and very gentle, very far away.

Bob Brooks

CLOSED CIRCLE

The eye. It's a round thing
with a dot in the middle.
I can see through mine
but not yours. I know there's
more there behind your eye
but I can't see that.
What I can see is what
whatever's behind your eye
makes the muscles around it
do. How they move

features to show attitudes:
pursing of the lids, a skewed
brow, the forehead's
articulation, shrug
of the cheek—an alphabet
of gestures. Natural in origin
they might be but developed,
elaborated. A mute's
language the eye's language is

though no less one that can be
lied with. And how eloquent
the gaze is one sees
not in the eye at all
but on its periphery. The eye here's
nothing but a point of focus—
absent auxiliaries no more
readable than a marble in an egg-cup,
a ball in a bowl, a stone
with a spot painted on it.

When you say, "Look me
in the eye," then,
you should know as I do

I could still hide
falseness somewhere and not
say so, not be able to;
I could, you could,
we could both do this.

Amy Ball

RUNNING AFTER THE TOOTH FAIRY

Somebody say:
"You're beautiful" and then walk away
—And I'll follow you
with the click-click of my slick
plastic soles on the sidewalk
till I catch you at the corner
when you stop
for the flashing red hand at the crosswalk
surprised to see me
flushed and breathing quick behind you
You expected a trinket moment
that I'd pocket and keep
You wanted to be the fast coin
Mom and Dad would slip under my pillow
(as I lay asleep)
in exchange for the small molar or
sharp canine.
You never considered I'd follow
never thought the footsteps behind you
were mine
And now at the intersection
as the lights swing on black strings
like pendulums in the wind
here is where you and I meet
You didn't really think I'd come out from behind the counter
didn't imagine I'd leave the sweaty espresso machine
with the till still open and the tips in a jar—what kind of

crazy kid
 are you?
 What kind of
 crazy
 kid are you?
 What
 kind of crazy
 kid are you?
 we wonder together when the waiting red hand will
 make that quick change into the bright green man
 And I know that look in your face
 I saw that same struck look stuck to my mother's face
 the night I clawed through the fistful of fog to stay awake
 as I felt her hand slip beneath my pillow and take
 the teeth that were mine and replace
 them with a coin.

I know that look
 It was on my mother's face
 that night
 when she slipped her hand under
 her best girl's pillow
 and this best girl
 opened
 her eyes.

Winifred Hughes

SPELLCHECK

NOT FOUND: POETICS
 REPLACE WITH: POTHOOKS

This computer is not
 theoretical. Programmed for
 virtual practicality,
 it stumbles over
 my poetics, my need
 for explanations,
 frameworks behind mainframes.
 Instead, it suggests
 pothooks. What could be
 more utilitarian?
 An open fire, kettles
 simmering thick stew.
 A backyard shed,
 walls slung with buckets,
 clay pots, rods and tackle.
 A smell of onions
 or compost. A jaunty
 swinging. Or a shape,
 cursive and open-ended,
 a signifier.
 I think I'll keep
 the pothooks in my poetics.
 I can always hang
 something weightier on them,
 throw something in the pot.

James Harms

HELICOPTER

Who are you
lifting the bag of groceries
from beside the tiny helicopter?
Your quarter didn't work,
your little boy expects
the blade to turn.
His hand is in yours
as you help him down
from the torn yellow seat;
its cushion makes a sound
so nearly silent, an exhalation.
You push the helicopter;
you kick it once,
then again. It doesn't move.
Oh well, you say, touching
his nose with yours.
He doesn't cry.
The pavement
is sticky with heat.
Cars exchange parking places
for the wide lanes between;
the street is marked down
the middle like a pattern,
the broken yellow line.
You enter the crosswalk
beside the mailbox,
pick your little boy up
beneath the arms
to let him drop a letter
in the blue throat.
And thinking it easier,
hoist him to your hip
and carry him across the street,
cars stopping to let you pass.

Then the helicopter starts.
It begins to hum, its blade
turning, the tiny carriage
lifting and dropping, pilotless,
flying. It goes and goes
as you walk toward Elm Street
where you stop for a second,
lower your boy to the sidewalk,
bend down to tie his shoe.
Then, hand in hand, you turn
the corner, the two of you, gone.
The helicopter rises and falls.
It is filled with quarters.

Rob Carney

WHAT IS WHAT

What do you benefit, knowing I'm in love?
Turn the page. There are always good stories
more general than this, having plots in them, themes,

with room for all. Turn the page.
Here there is only this story,
and I promise by the end

you won't know her name.
I'll likely not convince you she's beautiful.
None of us will know for sure

if I deserve to be happy or not.
I would rather kiss her eyelids,
brush her hair aside and kiss

the back of her neck, all her hundred faces,
and be kissed. I would rather
it were raining now, crazy rain

like an animal shut in the night,
hurling its black bulk, its black fur at the door,
shuddering window screens,

squeezing itself through shingles, seams,
to drip, drip, drip,
and dripping, understand that we aren't bothered,

not at all, in our low, gold light,
quite still 'til we won't remember who is who
or which are my thoughts, which ones hers

as they lean at the window,
as they maybe go out together in the rain.
You might want to skip all this.

Or stay. But I'm only going to tell you
how I'd rather be holding her left hand
in my right, walking, the rain familiar,

the clover choking out the grass
and all those piled stars sparking
so I tell her anything, anything

to keep what I have caught inside, that thunder,
that startling, barking gift
come again to tell me Yes, I want. I want.

I'm only going to tell you there I was,
answering the phone,
hearing in its ringing already

her voice calling back,
about the way, she said, I'd leveled
suddenly, saying to her in her dream last night

we'd been doing it all wrong,
such rolling indirection, make-believe fog,
standing, eating, smoking together

but like two neighbors waving from porch swings
on opposite sides, from opposite ends of the street,
a fond kind of hiding.

Put this away,
this half-undoing outward,
this hesitant admission love is loss

and wanting to ask, but careful, scuttle-like,
My shell? Are you my home?
I'm doing it wrong now, and I know it,

recognize it the way I recognize snow
by its taste, chill smell, and quiet in the air,
know it like evening light, or rain,

how there is—good luck—no easy,
no halfway. Only, as always, falling.

Molly Tenenbaum

WHEN IT RAINS, IT POURS

My father's name was Morton, so the little girl,
her yellow dress on rain-rilled blue,

was me. The same way "You Are Here" signs knew,
the Salt People, from where they were, could tell

what our rain would do. He sang
"Sweet Afton," strewed my bedtime's sifting

story of Tolly and Kay, their friend Crazy Tree with a door
at the root up to hundreds

of rooms: forest room-flickery, dim;
ocean room-foamed sandy-blue; sleeping room-

frilled like another girl's
bedroom might be, gauzed windows as white

as the drizzle hummed over, on, in me. And inside
the highest, most shivery twig, a meadow

for picnics, tall grass all the way
to pure sky, and sprinkles

of yellow-white flowers. I put devilled eggs
in the story to match. And woke, the first one

in the kitchen, where tiny holes
in the shaker made powder, where threads

of the opening top
ground caught salt finer.

Saw seven rice grains,
yellowy, clear.

Just in case, just in case, called my mom—
though with bare feet on linoleum, early,

I'd seen the Salt Girl, deep blue,
in splashes like stars. She'd be wherever I'd look,

beside me on swings, in stove-stream.
I'd heard the third daughter of a king

loved him as meat loves salt so knew the youngest
was secretly luckiest. I would be her,

rain-flecked song, swish, like the scent
through our screens, my father's

alyssum, his lavender, rose.
They could have dipped

their salt fingers in anywhere, and found a stream—
through breezeways, through whispery

metal spouts, among the green braes, up to shimmering
pastures through a little door—it always

poured. The softness,
the girl's yellow dress. And I had a clear self

to keep myself in, a me not me—
like the hag, who at night before bed, poured magic

in her golden little finger, unscrewed it, and slept
with it under her head; like the young man

who kept Death in a sack he hid high in a tree
till they begged him—*Open it.*

Marc Malandra

INSPIRED BY A JOURNAL THAT WON'T ACCEPT
SUBMISSIONS ABOUT NICARAGUA, WHALES, OR
PARTS OF THE BODY

Juan here was born in Nicaragua.
His uncle was suspected of selling arms
to the Contras. He wants to be a lawyer.
Not to help his uncle, you understand,
but to save the whales.
He cares about the planet.

He just showed up—I didn't plan it.
He's just flown in from Nicaragua;
his visa's got all the proper seals.
I think we should lend a hand.
I'm afraid he doesn't understand
much English. Remember, he's a lawyer,

or perhaps not quite a lawyer
yet... Look, it's not like he's from another planet,
but if he can't stay here, I understand.
At least give him a drink—¿*Quieres agua*?
Can you look him in the eyes
and say you won't help him save the whales?

I mean, you *love* whales,
you once backpacked through Nicaragua
and Guatemala—remember the palms
swaying in the breeze? The planet
is dying. We need more lawyers
willing to take a stand

for the environment, take a stand
for the welfare of the whales.
There's one rule here, one law—yours;
but if you send him back to Nicaragua
the loss to the planet

will be on your head.

I know I've been a pain in the butt
lately. I don't expect you to understand
why I care about the planet
all of the sudden, or the whales;
as for my friend from Nicaragua,
he may never be a lawyer.

I understand why you can't stomach
my nonsense about the planet and Nicaragua,
but I still think the whales need a good lawyer.

Philip Dacey

AMHERST WITH FRIES

When the bored cashier at Burger King
pauses as she takes my order to note
with at least a little wonder
how "Whopper" and "water" "sound alike,"
I say nothing except, "They do, don't they?"
but secretly rejoice to find alive where I least
expected it the spirit of poetry.

I want to kiss her, despite her ugliness
and nature so dwarfish she has to stand
on a stool to punch the register, for I'm thinking
of Emily Dickinson, absolute mistress
of the off-rhyme, her deliciously glancing blows
of sound, and know I'm talking to her sister.
If I'd add, "Like 'pearl' and 'alcohol,'" I'm sure
she'd nod and go all dizzy, one more Inebriate of Air.

I want to invite her to my poetry workshop
at the local college or even to conduct one

immediately in this place—among the grease
and sickeningly sweet drinks tell her that
William Stafford said what she already
knows instinctively, how all words rhyme,
any two of them sounding more like each other
than either one of them sounds like silence,
that “burger” has an affinity, therefore, with
“Massachusetts,” and language is always
and in any state the special of the day.

Beginning to feel as close to her as, say,
“Whopper” is to “water,” I suddenly realize
that although few people full-rhyme
all people off-rhyme, that any one of them
is more at home with any other, or should be,
than either is with styrofoam cups or a plastic tray.

Of course I don’t tell her all that I’m thinking—
some passions are best concealed;
I only accept the fact that I’m order number five
and wait down the counter for what started all this
to arrive, thinking that here,
the last years of the twentieth century
scrape America off the grill, shovelling it
into the stainless steel trenches
at either side, to be cleaned out later,
there’s cause for hope in this minimum-
wage earner’s surprising—even to her, I bet—
regard for what daily commercial use
has reduced to near invisibility: our life-
giving diet of vowel-and-consonant clusters,
including the two she grasped in her imagination
like a customer delicately picking up
his fry and contemplating it momentarily,
disinterestedly studying the shape and coloring,
feeling the texture under the thumb and forefinger,
before closing his loving lips over it,
the way Emily closed her lips,
and her sister could as well have, over,
“I’m Nobody—Who are You—Are you Nobody, too?”

And as I’m eating like any other nobody,
I realize I’m enjoying, more than my Whopper,
the thought of this cashier at her post
playing the role of an intelligent ear,
a kind of subversive national weapon,
a uniformed and smiling stealth poet,
listening with great discrimination
as a line forms all day in front of her.

Dennis Ward Stiles

A POET’S ADVICE

You must go easy
and not spill the juice
from the hammer.
You must pin feathers
to snow. They
must come from crows
and be blue.
You must pull thread
out of another time
and weave webs
in the way of the spiders.
When you fail, you must taunt
the bull of failure.
When you triumph
you must tread water
like a mouse in a toilet.
You must ply the problem
out of the essence,
plow the world
with moth and butterfly
as your team.

Peter Cooley

TO MY HYPOCRITE READER

Every day in motion, these wheels under me,
the city swarming around me, every season
another summer surrounding my glassed-in world,
this cool sarcophagus urging me on.
And at the edge of my eyes, the multitudes,
the poor always with us, wandering the roadsides,
those who beg at intersections or forage uncut grass
for a bottle, a tin can, to sell back at dinner time.

Reader, come with me, guide my hand,
I need directions, turning. I need
to keep my words steady going down.

New Orleans, unreal city... I have nowhere to be
myself, no room can bear my body's hunger
for taking down the shadows, the armatures of all I see:
the three-legged dog in heat on the churchsteps;
the whores letting down straps of pastel sundresses,
tanning their breasts across the balcony of their motel.
Yawning, they wave to me, always plying their trade.

And now, street after street of houses abandoned
to those with no house, windows knocked out.
Nausea: the wheels spin me on.

Reader, without you, I have no one.
This sickness quickens me. I feed on it.
I am thrilled by own illness. Be my friend.

Vertigo: the wheels spin me on:
crows, gulls, bent over patches of black water
between cracks in the road; a pelican,
lost inland, wanders, one leg broken, a used car lot,
flapping and stumbling, passed over by a man

of the cloth, white collar riding a rusted motorbike,
a sign on his chest, another on his back,
HAVE YOU BEEN WASHED IN THE BLOOD OF THE LAMB?

Reader, drive for me. I have nothing
here to hold me as, rung by rung,
I go down the old ladder of terror
attaching itself to a stone wall, shaking
the foundations of despair which may,
any step, give out as I straddle the blind air,
rising at morning to wander, to pass the day in transit
out of doors, feeding on this city, its liver, heart and brain,
no other way to satiate this need to leave myself.

About Our Contributors

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WE NEED YOUR HELP

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.

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

