



Poetry

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POETRY NORTHWEST

WINTER 1997-1998

Molly Tenenbaum

ODE TO THE UGLY COLORS

Hairball beige, rust that spots
every single snapdragon,
mustard of 70s telephones, she swore
she never would wear these, and why
grownups did, who could guess, when they could put on
all the pink they wanted.
At ten, she claimed brown
her favorite color, but only
("brown's not a color") to shock little yellows and reds —

or maybe she'd seen maroon velvet,
even then, felt the blush of cocoa powder.

Iris, iridescent, you were lovely, color the crescent moon
might flash if she fluttered a wing,
glimpse of her aunt Eva's silk sheath, shadow
the black-haired girls
caked on in the junior high bathroom
and came out looking, the principal said,
like sluts, but she loved

their necklines of peacock acrylic, their idea
of brushing blue anywhere.

Sings to you now, blotchy green, underside
of a sunflower leaf that will be completely dead tomorrow.
Sings to you, burnt buttermilk, tabletop clotted with cup-rings.
Sings to you, gray porous linoleum tracked with wet weather.
And to you, white glare, all a cataract sees.

She wears green of cow-dung, tan of an old dry gourd.

Color of mildew, of grated potatoes.
Color of grunt, harrumph, and husk.
The old lips of yogurt, the lost cottage cheese.
Scrape and caw, a dinged aluminum pot.
The granite color of collar bands.
The chicken-fat color of sleep-scum.
Mud of her eyes.

Ugly colors, she sings, you have
the most beautiful names.
Dove-gray, olive, dusky rose.
Murrey, claret, bloodstain, myrtle.
Mauve, russet, mahogany, buff.
Sallow, ginger, pockmarked nacre.
Birchbark, mica, sandstone, moss.

You are soft as the cotton sheet in the mending basket.

You are the damp cloth
fever heats through every five minutes.

When you wrap around a person, when she pulls
you tighter, heavy weight of wool in winter,
she feels a tug

in her heart —
cuticle detaching, claw caught in a sweater.
Unsealing of a leaf before it falls.

Thom Ward

Two Poems

AT MANNY'S FROSTED MUG

amidst the clamor of dual
televisions, so many locals
moving among each other,
splashing expletives and gossip,
the sudden clack of pool

sticks, somewhere between
popcorn and chicken wings,
the first swig, the last burb,
one of us will turn
to our spouse, our cousin, perhaps

the waitress serving bottles
of Bud or the salesman
who peddles homeopathic
assurances, turn on a stool cut
from the heartwood of an ash

that shaded the gazebo
in the park where they held
the Old Fiddlers Picnic, fat
wedges of Muenster on rye,
three-legged races, some marbles

spun over dirt, the stench
from Drake's rubber plant
pushing through the lilacs'
bouquet, persistent as the boys
who pinch the elbows

of girls passing secrets, their
breath all molasses and mint,
a thousand fiddle notes
scratched, then pinned to the skirts
of women Virginia-reeled,

grand-squared by men
who clap and stomp, handkerchief
their moist faces... O, Pascal
you were right. How often
we wander in times not ours,

that zone between the past
and the present, trying
to recover in a joke
or a story what we accept
was, what we presume is,

while across the street
at Vera's Knick-Knack Shop
the shelves are heavy
with porcelain figures, discarded
magazines and books, pieces

of tired puzzles waiting
in their boxes, like the bolts
and washers next door
at Earl's, claw hammers, wrenches,
every type of nut, every nail,

even the walls, it seems,
are on consignment... O,
how we love the lies
that are this town, the brick
scrubbed and pointed, the road

resurfaced, dark water filling
the canal. We say the schools
have grown small, the bank
will change owners, offer
new versions of old bargains,

that there's too much oil
on lane seven, not enough on six.
What would we do without

such beautiful fabrications,
now that each of us,

refusing to stay, can never leave.
Who knows? Meanwhile we gather,
lose ourselves to The Firemen's
Breakfast, the county fair, Methodist
rummage sales, or to a stool

against the bar where we drift
call for another drink
over the ruckus, the prattle,
the delicious midnight din
of Manny's Frosted Mug.

385 QUAKER MILLS ROAD

After scotch at Manny's, craps
with Harrelson and Brooks,
Chet Gilson fishflopped
on his bed, still drunk,
made love to his wife, cooked
Canadian sausage, then built
a new silo west of the barn,
had four children, rotated
alfalfa and wheat, led the Kingpins
to consecutive titles, studied French,
basic thermodynamics, cut
a swath through the corn
for his Cessna, served as deacon,
village ambulance driver, whacked
rodents with a shovel, attended
soccer games and music concerts,
dreamt one night of a hawk
that sang *it ain't necessarily so*
and woke realizing
he lives next door.

SHOES

One shoe, two shoes, a dozen shoes, yes. But how
can you describe several thousand shoes?

— Edward R. Murrow

At the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C.,
between the video histories and photo tableaux,
this slag heap, this lava flow, of shoes:

Old shoes, tired shoes, lost shoes, abandoned shoes,
an industrial rubble of shoes. Saddle shoes, buckle shoes,
tie shoes, high-button shoes, wing tips, cap-toes, loafers, flats.
Open toe and closed toe shoes, baby shoes, grannie shoes,
high-heeled shoes, low-heeled shoes, well-heeled shoes,
broken shoes, oxfords, sandals, brogues, taps.

Shoes without their mates. Overshoes, winter shoes,
summer shoes, all-season shoes, shoes that have seen
better days, shoes with their eyes on the future,
hopeful shoes. Left shoes, right shoes, formal shoes,
leisure shoes, shoes for all occasions, work shoes, party
shoes, a pollution, an ash heap, an hallucination of shoes.
Fashionable and unfashionable shoes. Practical shoes,
hiking shoes, dress shoes, casual shoes, suede shoes,
cordovans, shit-kickers, monk-straps, pumps.
Shoes with their tongues cut out, mute shoes, deaf
shoes, shoes with their eyelets ripped, soleless shoes,
shoes that will never again take up their laces and walk.
Leather shoes, cloth shoes, cheap shoes, expensive shoes,
a mass grave, a wasteland, a moonscape of shoes.

Shoe (shoo) *n.* 1. A durable covering for the human foot.

2. A part or device that functions as a protective covering.

3. A device that retards or stops the motion of an object.

4. A chute, as for conveying grain from a hopper.

5. **Shoes.** *Informal. a.* Position; status: *You
would understand my decision if you put yourself in my shoes.*

Plight: I wouldn't want to be in her shoes.

b. If the shoe fits shoes. Waiting for the other shoe to drop shoes.

Nobody's shoes. Somebody's shoes. Anybody's shoes.

Everybody's shoes

LUCKY

He was a lucky bastard.

He had the luck of the Irish,
was lucky at love.

It was just his luck.

He had kissed the Blarney stone,
stroked the rabbit's foot,
found the four-leaf clover,
touched the hunchback's hump.

He thanked his lucky stars
he always lucked into things,
lucked out. No matter how
he tried or pushed his,
his luck never changed
or ran in streaks; it held.

He was always in luck.

When other people were
down on theirs, calling his
dumb or blind, he knew his
luck was pure. He wished
them it, for all the good it
did them; it was just his.

And if his days were numbered,
when his number came up, well,
it was his lucky day:

luck was a lady that night;
he got lucky.

He was a lucky stiff,
as luck would have it.

THE GOSPEL OF RED-HOT SHOES

Each time I heard about the mother witch
dancing to her death in the red-hot shoes,
I clapped my hands: Read it again! The bitch
within had already awakened, and I wanted
her dead, stick-and-stone dead, knowing

she was mean and self-obsessed. Whose fault
was this? Not my mother, who read and sang
to me while I stayed in bed pretending to be
sick. Not my father, who held my hand while
my mother did her mother things, or held her

in his arms and danced sometimes. Not God,
who could hang upside-down like the moon.
Not even my sister, who lay in our dark room
whispering of monsters whose slime-haired
tails and legs would wrap around my ankles

if I climbed down to hide or drink or pee.
No, it was no one's fault that I could name.
I was too young to say it was my wickedness
I wanted dead. I just kept drawing the red-hot
shoes, little fires that licked the mother witch's

toes, next her insteps, then her heels, until
her ankle bones melted and she had to dance
on stumps. If I'd shown these to anyone,
maybe something could have been done,
something prevented. I could have been

told the mother witch was nothing but my own
darkness, projected. I could have learned to live
with it. Or I could have been given red-hot shoes.
Dance, they could have said. I would have tired
so easily then. I would have been forgiven.

NIGHT FOOD

At the sweet spice house, we ate and ate,
my lost brother and I opened our mouths
and took in cornices and sills, latticework,

while at the back of our knees, shadows
from the forest rubbed like beasts, fur
of our terror pouring itself into the night

where the moon climbed, shrinking.
The house was the body of our mother.
The breasts were the spaces we fell into

when we had eaten so much the frame
began to sink into itself like a woman
who'd eaten the vowels from her keening.

My brother knew none of this.
Whenever he came to me, we set off
for the pathlessness, saying nothing

so our senses would not intervene.
Once at the house, we started on the side
still warm with sun. The sweetness then!

When we couldn't eat a bite more,
we would start back through the forest.
I can't tell all that happened then,

night fell so deep. But sometimes I held
still while we bled into each other
like shadows sinking as they spread.

SUPPER

How does a mother do it,
give you her terrors like
food. *Here, take and eat,*

so you eat, you grow strong
though you lie awake nights
weak in your bones,

you know how fast the door
would break down if
someone tried to get in,

so you study locks, evasions,
you map out escape routes
in dreams, and all this time

your mother is saying *Don't tell
your name if they can hurt you*
not in words but in milk, meat,

she lays everything on a plate
and you eat, eat, you are bone
of her bone, will be dust of her dust,

you go on with the meal she has
set you while you dream of escape
routes, of saying your name

to a man who takes your heart
in his hands like food he can't live
without, until you say *Did you know*

you were eating my mother then wait
to see what he does, if he swallows,
if you can breathe on your own.

THE YEAR BEFORE THE BREAKUP

I never wanted to go.
I wanted to stay in bed with my blankets
and quilt, my books and lamp.
I twisted my feet in the top sheet.
I pulled my quilt to my chin.

When my mother came in I lay unblinking.
I know you're awake.
Why couldn't she leave me alone?
I could read all day, using up nothing
but my bit of oxygen, light.

Why did I have to sort the darknesses out
the way I would one day sort out
my lover's socks? Matching dark to dark,
thinking of his ankle bones so near,
whispering *Don't ever leave me.*

Not a plea. A threat I could barely
follow. If I'd gone earlier to the forest,
would it have been different?
Would I know why I'm so awake
each time I hear the word?

Forest. Forest
I know it's in me. I'm just not sure how long
I can carry it, what I'll say the next time
my lover takes me by the shoulders:
What's wrong? You seem

so distant.
How I'll tell him I feel shadows
unpack from the back
of my neck like the trackless cries
I can't stop making.

Gregory Djanikian

ALMOST ENOUGH

He wants something extraordinary,
a heron feather floating to his hand,
or the Pleiades, all seven sisters,
flaring above his house.

He wants the nearby pasture cleared
of old box springs, all the tractor parts,
he wants his bad neighbor
to fall to his knees, confessing
his love for the Yukon, say,
or the tip of the Australian desert.

He wants people to have
as many suitcases as they need.

But a hundred oboes for his room.
Starfire lilies scenting his every morning.
And what about someone saying *syrup* in just
the syrupy way he could get used to?

Maybe the wind in his dream
will die down long enough
so he can hear what the leaves
have been whispering
all these years.

And what if he could touch everything
just beyond the edge of his life,
the fox deep in the woods,
and the woods deeper within the fox?

If he could move the river now
five degrees to the left so the sun
could glint perfectly into his parlor,

if he could invert the clouds
so the scalloped edges
would graze along his roof.

It's three in the afternoon
and he can hear the cows in the upper field
lowing to come home, he can
hear the bad neighbor's bad dog
barking again on its tether,
and soon, he'll be hearing nothing else —
just the noise of things
needing to make noise,

like this crow cawing at him
from a pine branch, and the dog again,
and his own surprising voice
answering back.

Jim Barnes

CORNICHE DE L'ESTEREL

Even now the road is narrow
and curved, the reddish rocks so

close to the pavement that they had
to paint them white. No crosses laid,

but many the dead along this road
between Cannes and San Rafael.

When Scott and Zelda took the villa
and drove into the moon and mood

that linger still on the pages
of Alabama's book, the bridges

were of native stone and curves
red gravel. You had to swerve

dangerously to miss the goats
and potholes. To know the road

you must drive it, leaning into
its slopes and turns, hugging a few

of the rocks so close that you feel
the full forces of the Esterel

on your back. Something here wants
to push you into the sea. It's haunted

by spirits of all those who came
this way in search of selves no fame

could satisfy. Drive south, along
the coast at night, but not alone.

Let the moon hang full over the sea,
its mountains almost within reach,

and, if you are lucky, you may know
the Esterel, feel its shadow

move you toward a destiny
never dreamed a possibility.

Bob Brooks

POINTS OF INTEREST

Look to your left or eastward from the straight-edge Interstate south of Pueblo, traveling at the posted maximum seventy-five-mile-an-hour speed limit, and see sparse sagebrush tumbling by that fast up close and slower and denser farther, out to the thick dark gray-green fixed horizon line at the far margin, and imagine rising, floating, above this sepia-toned earthscape, flat as an engraving plate, the color of an old air-dried, time-cured newspaper: floating and looking down at the sagebrush benday dots on the halftone surface and trying to make out what it's a picture of, thinking perhaps you're too close for the shape to come clear and should rise higher, but higher the dots merge and blur and the picture stays just as mysterious, mysterious in the same way as the signs you've been seeing that say Point of Interest 5 Miles and nothing else, and then Point of Interest 2 Miles, and now Point of Interest with an arrow to an exit to the desert and nothing else, to the same scene you've been seeing, as if you've overheard a question in a language you don't recognize and then its answer in that same language.

Jeanne Lobmann

FLYING HORSES

1.

In my early fantasies I thought if the day comes
I dare to climb on the Flying A red horse
on the gas station pole at the corner
of Fifth and Main, if the day ever comes
I take the golden bridle in hand and pass
through clouds and stars, the great wings
opening and closing as we flap through the universe
toward the Chimera that waits in the night
to vomit the lead from its jaws, would I
be bold to risk such transformation,
seize the bright mane though it burn my fingers,
though heaven's air is thin and hard to breathe,
though planets spin and die around us?

2.

In my late life and hoping the muse would bless me,
in Firenze's Boboli Gardens I asked my love
to take a picture where I stood next to the statue
Pegasus tamed by white marble. Born of the Gorgon's
blood, there was no sign of the wound that bore him,
no light in the unmoving eyes. The merciless wings
did not close, no feather fell to the ground,
silence heavy in the body, the muscled flanks and back,
one perfect foreleg lifted and ready to rise. My head
hardly reached to the pedestal base, my hand
on stone struck no spark from a single hoof.

3.

Centaur, bareback rider, feet and legs bare
to the rough wet hide of horse, thighs and knees
fitting his ribcage, our two hearts pumping,
his long muscles expand, contract under skin
that rolls against me smooth as water.
Night rushes past, another dark rider
flying ahead of the sea-wind,

its bitter smell of dunegrass and kelp.
At Half Moon Bay the beach goes on forever.
Bent low to the hot and straining neck
my body staccato hoofbeats on hard sand,
the roar of invisible ocean
in our four ears, we are saltspray and foam
and the moon will never catch us.

Robert Hershon

THE MANSARD ROOF AS A SIGN OF THE
MATURITY OF ROADSIDE ARCHITECTURE

Let's drive five hundred miles
take our ease at the Holiday Inn
braid sardines into lanyards
count every word in the *Plain Dealer*
spend our night at the Day's Inn
sneak Ramadan snacks at the Ramada Inn
open a vein at the Red Roof Inn

Now everyone is eating the secret
purple grains of the Incas
If that doesn't work, what will?
It comes with a grudging breakfast
and Jeopardy reruns
at the Count Me Out Inn

Let's drive five hundred miles into
a sunset that pauses, considers
and reasserts itself in the sky
How did I offend the night that
it only shows its back to me?
I draw the shades at the
Well Are You Going To Stand There All Day
Or Are You Going To Come Inn

Let's drive five hundred miles to the funeral

If the homilies are brief and all the verses
don't get sung we can be back in our room
at the I Had A Hat When I Came Inn
by the fifth inning Martinez beats out Thomas
and McGwire to start at first base, life
is full of unexpected all-stars illegal ashtrays
unlisted 800 numbers hidden ball tricks
silhouettes in plucked chenille
a profile of the loved one left
in the mirror by a previous occupant

We're atheists of course!
But we wanted the children to make up
their own minds so we locked them
in a convent for twenty years
We're gentle as lambs! But we encourage
our friends to commit axe murders
just to establish base readings at
their home base, the And Now This —
Just Inn

Let's drive five hundred umbrella steps
until the radio foams over
I hand you a dollar and a minute later
I ask you to give it back Why do you now
feel ripped off, angry and poor?
You moan and slide down
the end of the road From here on it's all
used tacos and cars drenched in red sauce
while you try to think up an explanation
for the manager of the Are You Almost Finished
I Need To Get Inn

Alexandra van de Kamp

APRIL EVENING

Plaza de Espana, Madrid

Not five minutes ago, a fountain
with two nymphs — each kneeling on one knee,

a pitcher of water tilting out from their hands —
switched on its lights automatically

at 9 pm. One nymph has a hand lifted
to the back of her head as if to feel

for a haircomb fallen out of place.
A gesture of matter-of-fact love

for the things we find most often
next to us: strands of hair, the light

falling on us over and over again
each day. Buses glide by — telling those of us

who are in the park that we are too still.
We who are waiting for the April night

to soften us, blend us into what is next to us
as nearby lovers sculpt out their bodies

against the grass, press into this world
as best they can. So how does a fountain

sense the night coming, know that the sky
is deepening past itself towards a blue

so darkly lit, so just about to go
yet not going, that it pours itself

into the moment, tucks the buildings
and streetlights within its blue-rinsed

luminescence? Perhaps the fountain's water
perceives the light leaving as our bodies

know absence — the skin imprinted
with what has been while the world

touches us into the present.
At times, birds fly so close

we are slapped with the air
they have left behind. Or perhaps

the bronze nymphs falter in their pouring
when they know the day has left them

just one degree too alone.
And with this hesitation,

the fountain lights blink on — stunning us
into near-darkness. The water braiding

its golden rope up and down the sky,
the city now settling into versions of night.

And we are all here, gathered
into a waiting, believing in the ability

of a light so gentle, it could hold us
like a hammock, swing us delicately

between motion and stillness, bracket us
within the thin parentheses of evening:

the murky sheen of the grass already fading,
the pavement bruising to a milky gray.

And you could say this fountain lights up
in a Spanish city because at the end

of the 20th century such things are feasible.
But I prefer to think what we are

climbs into us and pours out of us
with each passing moment

so when we lose a little
of what we were (the daylight receding,

certain rooms) we give off our signals,
glimmer like stars — our light phantom-limbed,

burning out of what was.
So on an April evening,

it takes little to make us pause —
for a moment, buoyed

beyond ourselves, lit
by what we almost are.

MY DEAD FATHER SETTLES IN

I tell him about video, and he checks out
 a dozen cowboy movies. He eats pigs feet and drinks
 cheap beer from my refrigerator. I could talk his ear off,
 but he asks for his supper. I say it's on the stove.
 He says he never eats that way, likes it on the kitchen table
 in bowls. "I'm not your mother," I say.
 He smiles, and puts on a tape, explains how he used
 to work seven to ten, seven days a week, and deserves
 a little relief — John Wayne or Jimmy Stewart.

He sits there in his dark work clothes, one tape after another.
 He asks if I can run out now and get some more beer,
 since he's just sucked down the last cold one.
 "I'm not your wife," I say. "Go get the damn beer yourself.
 We got pause on the VCR, and you can take my car."
 He reaches in his pocket, pulls out a folded hundred,
 flips it my way. I tell him how Mama said he was careless
 with his money, how once a hundred dollar bill flew out
 the car window. Pick up some more tapes too,
 he says. And hurry back son, we're getting to the good part.

MY DEAD FATHER REBUILDS MY ENGINE

"Ambition is a dream with a V-8 engine."
 — Elvis

He says he can't believe I'm driving a Toyota,
 so my dead father goes to the local auction,
 buys me a Rambler. He gives them my truck,
 and pays the balance in cash, just like my mother
 says he used to, thumbing big bills, looking
 crisp and fresh from the bank. He says on credit
 you're always looking over your shoulder,
 something men like us should never do.

It's a car as old as he is dead: a Nash with fins,

push button transmission, and lots of chrome.
 He drives it out of the lot, and down the street
 to my house, the tail pipe blowing blue smoke.
 I tell him my Toyota was good for 300,000
 rugged miles, and this piece of crap needs
 new valves or worse. He just smiles,
 knowing something I don't know about cars.

The Nash wheezes in the drive and shudders
 to a stop, then won't turn over. "I told you,"
 I say, but he hops out. Don't worry, my father says,
 and we push the old trap into my back yard,
 right under the big white oak just off the deck.
 "You got a chain?" he says, opening the hood.

I get a tow chain from the garage, and my father
 throws it over a stout low limb, and goes at
 that engine with tools I didn't know he had.
 Somehow he's got ratchets, wrenches, a hammer.
 Before I know it, that block is swinging
 from the oak like a hanged man, and the old man
 is ready to crank the pulley down and start work.

Half a day later he's replacing old parts,
 looking at the wear on the oily lifters.
 "This looks to be as good as new," he says,
 replacing a valve cover, wiping the grease
 clean with one of my kitchen towels.
 Eight hours after he started, my dead father
 swings the engine back under the hood, bolts
 it down, and checks the oil. "Let's take a spin,"
 he says, and jumps in behind the wheel.
 We find a flat stretch of road, and he opens
 it up. "Smooth as a baby's ass," he smiles.

Then quickly as he came, the ghost foot
 eases up on the gas, brakes, his dead hand poking
 the button into park, and he hands me the keys.

John Bensko

AFTER SHILOH

In the evening on the second day
quail covered the ground
in the field beyond our tents,
the killing was over, and somebody brought out
a mouth harp. The Chaplain said the quail
were a sign, like in the bible
when the Hebrews in the desert
didn't trust God
so he sent them quail and manna.
I'm tired of the killing. We all are,
all of us that's not crazy.
Deaver, our Corporal, lost his mind
two weeks ago and only lives
to kill more graybacks. That fire
in his eye is enough to light
your soul to hell.

Last night
I dreamed we were walking along a road
and the dirt hillside was wet
and crumbled open. The rebs had buried
our soldiers there, and all
were peaceful except one. His head
came loose and it rolled
and chattered down the hill
toward me, yelling in a high voice
that the dirt was happy, and the dirt
was his lover, and if we knew
what he knew we'd all be kissing the dirt.
His head rolled across my feet
and on down the hill into a stream
where it floated away.

I'm not scared of dying so much
as being dead and still alive

like that head rolling down the hill
loving its dirt. Maybe it's right.
Maybe we all love the dirt
and should be kissing it.
In the battle our mouths turn black
from tearing open cartridges.
The powder tastes like sharp
burned earth. The smoke in the air
is full of it. Nobody goes home
after such a thing.

Down the road is a split rail fence,
a little garden plot
and a church the size of a right good house.
People live here, though the fighting
tries hard to make us forget.
If Moses and the Hebrews lived in the desert
forty years, then who's to say?
These trees shattered down to stumps
might turn green again.
The bloody pond might turn clear.
But that's all hope. Faith's got
nothing to do with hope.
Faith is knowing it's all dark
and it ain't going to get any better,
but you don't care. A body don't need
any quail in the evening,
nor bread in the morning.
All a body expects from God is dirt.
That's enough. To love it. Kiss it.

Wesley McNair

WAVING GOODBYE

Why, when we say goodbye
at the end of an evening, do we deny
we are saying it at all, as in We'll
be seeing you or I'll call or Stop in,
somebody's always at home? Meanwhile, our friends,
telling us the same things, go on disappearing
beyond the porch light into the space
which except for a moment here or there
is always between us, no matter what we do.
Waving goodbye, of course, is what happens
when the space gets too large
for words — a gesture so innocent
and lonely, it could make a person weep
for days. Think of the hundreds of unknown
voyagers in the old, fluttering newsreel
patting and stroking the growing distance
between their nameless ship and the port
they are leaving, as if to promise I'll always
remember, and just as urgently, Always
remember me. Is it loneliness too
that makes the neighbor down the road lift two
fingers up from his steering wheel as he passes
day after day on his way to work in the hello
that turns into goodbye? What can our own raised
fingers do for him, locked in his masculine
purposes and speeding away inside the glass?
How can our waving wipe away the reflex
so deep in the woman next door to smile
and wave on her way into her house with the mail,
we'll never know if she is happy
or sad or lost? It can't. Yet in that moment
before she and all the others and we ourselves
turn back to our separate lives, how
extraordinary it is that we make this small flag

with our hands to show the closeness we wish for
in spite of what pulls us apart again
and again: the porch light snapping off,
the car picking its way down the road through the dark.

Christopher Spinelli

GRAD SCHOOL ADMISSIONS REJECTION

Maybe it was the essay.
Maybe you seemed too certain,
Too sure of yourself in fields
That celebrate the multiple piracies

And confusion behind words. Maybe
It was your record, not without flash,
But far from stellar. You can recall

What a friend once said
(*I will write*): *Maybe we've got to fail*
Something colossal
Before we have a sense of the world.

You have not failed anything colossal.
Your blues are as temporal as candy.
Now please yourself. Embrace distractions!
Books, those wan moths, may escort you

To lightness. That one there, on Sir Francis Drake,
Contains copies of misleading maps
And records of meals no longer exotic.
Like everyone before you, you too will try
Some strange new meat the natives eat,
Some red and flashing berries.

Kris Caldwell

THIS IS NOT THE MEAL I ORDERED

This is not the meal I ordered.
This meal was served to the Queen of England the night before
she died.
This is the meal I should have sent back.
This is the meal that melts on my lover's tongue and all over
her hands.

This is the multicultural meal.
This is the meal the Marquis de Sade dreamed of on Mondays.
This meal has good karma.
This meal makes me want to come like monkeys.

This meal plays guitar better than you.
Julia Child would cut off her thumbs for this meal.
This meal was on "Oprah" twice.
This meal is a multi-media artist on a budget in the Bronx.

This meal drives a stick.
This meal staunchly refuses to have any truck with Free Masons.
This meal's terms are 10 net 30.
This meal was transported up the side of a mountain in the
middle of winter by mules with arthritis.

This meal has been deep-fried in beer batter for your
convenience.
This meal is interested in a career in advertising.
This meal smells of sunflower juice and flax seed oil.
This meal does not meet postal regulations.

This meal sucks on my nipples when my lover isn't home.
This is the meal that destroyed your marriage.
This meal is best served piping hot on a chilled plate in a
warm room to the sound of flutes.
This is a meal in the midst of a mid-life crisis.

This meal reads *Artforum*.

This meal is into aromatherapy.
This meal has a graduate degree in the algebraic function of
the pinhole camera.
This is the meal you've been waiting for.

This meal is working its way up the corporate ladder.
This is a meal that could be persuaded to run for president.
This meal is not rated.
This meal reads *Playboy* for the articles.

This is not the meal I ordered.
This is the meal I should have sent back.
This meal doesn't know when to quit.
This meal could go on forever.

Padma Hejmadi

CALLIGRAPHY

For us, tropical,
distances dissolve
into mist: beyond
each nearby

tracery of twigs
stenciled with a
delicate load
of snow.

Every summer we learn
the shape of a tree,
every winter
its structure

while this soft
and soundless white
erases
old seasons.

Oliver Rice

SAINT AUGUSTINE, JULY

He slouches beside the statue of Ponce de Leon,
where AIA turns across the bridge
to the beaches, Miami, the Keys,
old enough for a junior executive
but leaning into a guitar, sandaled, ponytailed.

There is something larger on the air
along the Avenida Menendez, around the fort,
the municipal marina, the pavilion
in the first marketplace of the new world.

In the night I think of scops, trouveres.
Of him in a room out there,
dissident,
soliloquial.

Of cattails along this unmolested shore,
sedges, caracara mounting an updraft.

Of persons on Granada Street, Orange Street,
who have had the radio on all day,
owe their mothers better,
believe that by going on and on
they will come out somewhere.

This afternoon on the pedestrian mall
he squats by the entrance to the shell shop,
waiting, it seems,
picking restless fragments,
waiting.

Yesterday at the city gate he sat,
brown bag at his feet, mouth open
for something he did not sing,
muting the strings with an open hand,

relics beneath us of Seminoles, Franciscans,
victims of pirates and hurricanes,
of Confederate profiteers and pellagra,

and today he did not appear,

father figures, intending sopranos,
keepers of precious diaries coming and going
at Betty's Baubles and Books,
Mi Casa, Potter's Wax Museum.

He has departed, I think.
To Provincetown, Taos,
wherever the rides are headed,

modest investors, estranged sisters
hanging on at work they did not intend,
despisers of bluejays and carrot cake
who are compulsive about the daily crossword,
wish to have a good talk with their sons.

Still grieve for the death of the peke.

David Francis

DEVIL'S HOLE PUFFFISH

"...occupies the smallest habitat of any viable population of vertebrates in the world."

— *Ichthyologica*

They're safe now, these inch-long fish
that live by nature in one place alone,
the devil's own hole, a rock-lined shaft
sunk too deep to measure: should harm
befall them, the back-up group in the lab
will start their kin over again.

These orphans endured the rise
and fall of the Pleistocene, evaporation
of the Death Valley pluvial lake
and banishment to this tepid lacuna
at Ash Meadows, tributary for a river
of brine that fails to flow to a sea.

They have faced extinction in our epoch
and won for the moment, though cans
and flashbulbs float like huge galaxies
in their pool. During drought, the aquifer
drains out, trapping them below
the shelf where they prefer to breed.

Once, scuba divers cut the fence
and climbed in, only to descend too fast,
drowning out of reach. Yet even now
the species clusters together every spring
to select their best dancers, those most fit
for sex, those that will survive

for nothing outside the hole.
No need to hurry. An entire era
of secrecy and second-hand sunlight
refracted down into Devil's Hole
has not made an eye obsolete.

Jon Pineda

ARBORETUM

Maybe the great tragedy of my childhood
is that I could never keep a fish
alive for longer than a week.
On Monday, I'd slide a blade
on the cheek of a bag and watch
everything empty into a round glass bowl:
water, fish and beige strands that rose
when each suddenness rippled from its body.
By Thursday, the fish would stay still
for longer than usual, and by Saturday...

It happened many times: Gold ones
with flecks of maroon in the shape of Virginia
(for that is all I knew) would disappear
behind the film of their eyes.
And the silver and black ones, the same.
And the blue and even bluer ones, the same.

In college, I watched a performance of *Romeo and Juliet*
in the clearing of an arboretum. I had brought someone
with me. She knew nothing of the fish.
We were just starting to date, though as I listened
to the play, I knew we would never die together.
Sometimes the lessons are this quiet — someone whispering
as if feigning to be sincere. Afterwards, a few of the actors
disappeared into the woods, and we followed them to the edge
where there was a large, man-made pond and a bridge
that spanned its width. We stood in the middle,
tapping the blond planks, their edges slightly green,
fresh, and watched as the koi rose,
every color suddenly appearing
to feed on our shadows.

TREE LICHEN

You. What I pick from my clothes.
The last shreds of disaster.
The soap-blue splat of kingdom come.

What I have left on the line, a frayed
thread caught on the jagged nail,
the forgotten hose swollen with ice.

Spineless. You are stemmy and dry
as the teased hair of women.
Creekside, when your chartreuse tangles.

To survive on so little, the vertical
soil of bark, and snow to suck
where it lands. You take no chances,

but lean out some to catch the light,
splayed like a cell, only this
is your body, simple, a sea-blue caulk

to fill the seams, a certain height which
you have mustered.
How quickly it can all unravel, a cricket

caught by winter. Better to hunker
flat against the host,
to be so slow, outside and still alive.

No one is looking for you, a growth
on dead limbs, stiff
and wadded like a frozen, ruffled dress.

Rootless, stemless, flowerless. What
holds you on is fear. You do
what you have always done. What is left.

JUNIPER

Suppliant, low-lying, as if their arms
hugged the knees of some host,
their backs, the piss-green tatter of winds —

Who will recognize them? The wooden spears
of their spines stiffen with sap,
atrophy. They are evergreen, slow-ripening,

yielding only a few berries at a time. Hard,
dark, the nipples of some god we
dare not pluck. Not pure. Pure is undivided.

What part don't they show the sun? The blue
blaze on their palms they hide
from the sky, some strange kind of reversal.

Astringent, adversarial. They persist in the evil
of grappling. Rejection and praise.
The small retractions we have learned to call sin.

Daphne, the ancients say, turned into a bay tree
to escape the rape of Apollo.
And Leda? Old school. To be taken unaware.

But to fall back as if expecting someone there
to catch you, to be a raft in a great river?
It's not I who calls this blasphemous. Just that lust

in a woman is so very unexpected. Bitter-fresh,
intoxicant, the berries blue with age.
They are trying to make an incense of themselves.

Tina Kelley

EMILY BELIEVES

People become like the bodies of water
they grew up near. I think she is right.

Harry, for instance, lived on the Sound, swung by tides, forever
testing himself, how near to the shore can he jump off the
tall pier,
can he jump by that nail, 20 feet up, is he a Nailer, is the tide
sufficiently high, can he measure his affection for Lois, is
it enough?

My old Michael was raised under two feet of snow
by the river that stopped for weeks on end. He was swift
and calming, buoying me for some seasons, but I never
understood his hyporheic zones, his currents, his eddies.

Sophia, on the other hand, is a pool woman, her home
smells of bleach, she has the clear sight of looking up at
the surface
through goggles, that brightness beyond reality. She moves fast,
though constrained by thick black lines and concrete.

Em, having been brought up near Coney Island, knew
from the start her love for West Texas Wes was doomed.

And Paul grew up too many places, but took with him
the irrigation ditch, through a lonely land made fruitful,
and the frogs in the marsh, peeping like chanting swings
squeaking, sometimes in sync, most often not.

Ryan was raised near no water, and look at him,
brittle as the last thin wafer of soap. For wetness he relied

on the clouds coming down, and he spent months waiting
for rainbows in the clear blue sky. He saw one. He knows
that most of a partridge's intake is in the form of dew.
A corner of his soul is parched, but he is at peace with that.

For several months in 1994 I seriously considered running off
with the man who grew up next to the abandoned gold mine.
He took me there and warned me of the winces,
the shafts of water that hide beneath the rails, beneath the
rotten ties.

Believing every altar should have a door of darkness, no
one knowing
where it leads, I found him to be a soulmate, but too dangerous.

So it is fitting that Rob, his fingerprints dark
on my morning blueberries, his kiss smooth
as the inside of a split almond, and his laughter
quiet but consistent, spent all his summers on the lake.

I have learned I am a brook person,
forever trying to catch up with my heart.

Only after all this can I see how you,
my tiny beloved, my unborn child,
are a dewdrop on a lupine leaf,
magnifying-glass bright.

Suzanne Matson

FOR FRANCES, WHO CAN'T STOP DREAMING OF DANGER,
EVEN WHEN THE CHILDREN ARE SAFE AT HOME

I know what you mean about being stuck holding
a particular moment like an uninsured porcelain —
how you can already envision the fragments
at your feet, the white dust
that can't possibly be fixed back into the seams.

There we are again, in traffic, your child and my child
in the car, whole as uncracked eggs,
the beauty of those foreheads.

And yet, right now my boy is somewhere pushing a truck
back and forth over his babysitter's carpet,
right now your girl is sitting in her classroom circle, watching
a teacher weave a story from
a child, a forest, a bag of enchanted stones.

And we have nothing to do with it.

You think that because the truck pushed into our lane
that you must add another ending to the story —

or maybe compulsion isn't the point, maybe helplessness
is, the way I feel when I lift my son out of his bath
and he briefly rests his large toddler's head
on my shoulder, trusting that
I will do what mothers do: take the naked
shining perfection, and learn to bear it.

Paulann Petersen

Three Poems

WIDOW'S WEEDS

With my wooden paddle,
I stir and stir,
sliding her skirts,
blouses, her dress —
its roses vined across
a silky sheen —
into my tub of inky soup.
No need, I told this
newly widowed one,
to spend precious drachmas
on a dressmaker's goods.
What *was* can become
in the time of a breath
what has to be. She'll see.

Now each thread
sucks at the dye
like a withered tongue.
Each of her garments
becomes the shade
created to swallow light —
a night that will
in its wearing surround
the new moon
of her separate flesh.

TRAVELER

Cast ashore
like some fleck of wood
brought here from afar
by the sea,

you reel — stunned
to breathe this reek of

strange urine, strange perfume
thick in saffron heat.

Here you are, foreign one,
familiar with only
the moon and stars,
a cloud-scraped sky,

the lidless eye of sun.
Take heart: only what floats
could be carried
as far as you've come.

MOONRISE, ASTERIA

The sea is gray, gray, an even
undisturbed slate. The moon,
just a heartbeat away
from the water where it rose,

is the burnished red of some
huge unnatural jewel —
full, tumescently round,
heavy as it can bear to be.

What is the sky to such a moon?
What does a blood-gem care
for the airy dark spread out
beyond its rim? Nothing.

Not an earthly thing.
It snubs the sky to pour itself,
in one long wavering gash,
across the salt gray sea.

Richard Robbins

MY HOPING FOR YOU

I want to conference with you
I want to workshop your poem
I want to parent you through this difficult time
I would mentor, but I'm an INFJ and do not easily relate

I once modeled behavior and once, too, devolved
Then it floored me the way
the slimmest creek treed that sky while, all around,
water commotioned beside scorpions
side-winding C-threats in the dirt
That was the year of kokanee and Loch Leven
I trouted all through fall, hip-pocketed
my aging, my son's non-loving
I trouted mud and gravel beds, pathing myself toward health

Maybe you should journey
There's a dark place where another you angel-waits
He will dialogue in his own dark way
He will do the soul-work of spirit management
Maybe your wife's anger fluster at the you
rigor-mortised in routine
even the not-you in charge grudges
I, too, once tombed function in dysfunction
Maybe you should de-cocoon your future
Your poem won't need language
Maybe your life is just a verb a heartbeat from verbing

Jeff Worley

EARLY EVENING AT THE CHEAPSIDE BAR & GRILL, LEXINGTON, KY

I'm reading the *Georgia Review*: No, pretending to. I'm eavesdropping, really, on two women at the next table drinking cherry wine coolers. Between them they've skewered a dozen men. Josh has won the prize so far, they agree, for most detestable dweeb. He rotates his underwear according to Day of the Week, red on Monday, for example. He picks nickels out of the mud; his hands feel like jellyfish. Pervis, though, is surely in the running; he tried to impress the dark-haired beauty I'm trained on (I've named her Shannon) by making rubberband animals on their first date and launching them across Lone Star Steakhouse. The poodle, Shannon admits with a shrug, wasn't bad. Then they start on their current beaux. *Lonnie's penis*, Shannon says, *is big and fat and pink as a whale's*. Cassandra (the name on her key ring) nods and stares off at the faint quarter moon, a scythe harvesting the light. Her green eyes glint like cut glass. *You know that old rock group Pink Floyd?* Cassandra says. *You know what a pink floyd is?* Shannon doesn't. The teacher in me rises up, wants to join in and make it a sort of threesome. *A whale's dick, that's what*. Cassandra sighs and sticks her small thumb in the air: *This is Fred*. Then they fix their eyes on me, a man writing who knows what. I could tell them the truth: that Pink Floyd took its name from Pink Anderson and Floyd Council, two obscure

Georgia bluesmen, but would this be worth giving myself away? I decide not. I lay aside the fine-point Bic, the normal equipment for a writer. The three of us watch it wobble back and forth on the warped tabletop until my pen is still. And still mightier than the sword, and more shameless.

Robert Wrigley

BODIES

Too soon, the foreshadowed, incipient curves come forth from my daughter's body. She is nine and wanted this night to bathe alone, thus breaking her little brother's heart. Privacy and changes, a sermonette of parental guidebook and buzzword blather: I held his small body to me as he cried himself to sleep. She curled up with a book in her bed, pink and flushed with identity, her mother having combed out her hair.

Let us mourn the advent of modesty, I say to the dog, who looks up expectant, inquisitive. She'd been licking herself with that rapt intensity her breed is famous for, and now, head aslant and tongue protruding, she looks as foolish as I must look, having sock-by-shirt-by-shorts stripped to stand naked in the center of the room, arms extended like a tenor awaiting his roses.

Now everyone's asleep but the dog and me, and she's grown weary, what itch or animal impulse to groom that afflicted her earlier gone. Still, here I am, going door to door, checking locks and turning out lights,

all but the one beside the easy chair
where I intend to sit and read the daily paper.
But first, I step out onto the porch
and the dog comes along. Our distant neighbors'
houses are dark, one solitary car plies its way
along the river road, and I remember
a night almost thirty years ago,
a girl and I drove the downtown streets
buck naked in my father's Mercury.
The car windows were nearly clear
of the fog our hours of parking brought on.

At first she giggled and I grinned,
but on the second or third pass down Main Street
we grew expansive and serious.
This was grown up business, we were sure
of it. She no longer slouched
or slunk down in her seat at the stop signs.
Under the radio's blare, the tires thrummed,
and the air filled with our musk.
We stayed like that all the way
to her house, where she dressed herself
by dashlight, kissed me once on the lips
and let her hand slide down my nearly hairless chest.
What magic there was might have lasted
all night, if she had not left then,
if the dome light had not gone on
and shown me there behind the wheel,
a boy not so much naked anymore as peculiarly nude,
bare, even, pale and grinning.
She loved me, she loved me not, but could not
help herself and laughed before the door slammed.

The dog nuzzles at my hand. The strangeness
of people is nothing new to her,
so under the light I sit, exposing myself
to the news. The paper's bottom edge nests
against my ordinary, unweaponly cock, the world
is a mess, horror and treachery abound.
War too is grown up business, and money,

and the body as well, a concern and a currency,
powerful and weak, manipulative and manipulable.

In love with all he feels, my son sleeps.
In the weeks to come, despite his pleas
and wheedles, his elaborate bubble bath
and squirt gun seductions, he'll bathe alone.
We will call it growing up, the long
solitary journey every body makes,
through the neighborhoods of modesty
to the homeland of shame, to the vast
uncharted wilderness of desire. We will not say so,
but already he is left behind, blind
to his sister's sudden hips and new swellings,
the last human soul in the household
perfectly at ease without his clothes.

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WE NEED YOUR HELP

Poetry Northwest is in its thirty-eighth 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

