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POETRY NORTHWEST

SPRING 1997

Catie Rosemurgy

Three Poems

GRACE LIES DOWN ON THE HOOD OF HER CAR

God stutters. Indiana is proof.
Corn. Corn. Corn. Corn. Corn. Girl.

I'm a seed, a stalk,
only He said me wrong. I'm a slip

of His tongue. Among the green rows,
I'm unheard of. Watch out cornflower.

I might end peace on earth
by looming petal-like above the petals.

Who am I kidding? The twenty ton sky?
The token trees?

In a field of corn I'm as brief
as a good-bye kiss.

And I don't want to end this way.
I want to be in someone's mouth

and be repeated until I'm as monotonous
as a hill of daisies.

In Indiana God should have said
lover more often instead of trying

to make His four new directions
seem meaningless.

Six hours of corn
and me not even a millisecond.

This is when I need a lover.
Together we would add up

to half a second.
He could take me into his mouth

and make me last.
In the face of flatness with no sides,

of bottom, bottom, bottom with no top,
I put up very close walls.

In Indiana I could be like sanity to him
except he could dig his fingers into me.

GRACE LIES ON THE ICE

People who live four months inside winter
don't think it's crazy
to lie on the ice. We all walk through our yards
to the lake. When I wake up,
I check on the bay
out my bedroom, my living room, and my kitchen windows.
I make sure there are tiny marks, like commas
on a clean sheet of paper,
that chip away at the white.
I don't need proof the marks are human beings.

In the grocery store,
people often seem surprised
by the variety of cans
and ways of printing the letter A.
They've spent the morning lying flat,

staring up, melting drops.
We press ourselves against the ice
until our skins hug us
and we're as tight and as rare
as fresh fruit.

There are barely two months
when the water is the right temperature
to surround you and slip in you.
There's not much time
to get the speed of sailboats
and the way to Chicago inside you.
There are barely two months
when your human size is a question.
Ice is a slap across
what you realize is your tiny red face.

No one leaves here, but we collect ways out.
Freezing temperatures make
a constant, trickling escape difficult.
Instead I shoot across the bay when the ice cracks,
my back is lifted by the sound of a dog barking.
When I come back down,
fish ache under my belly.
If I could make the earth a bit top heavy,
I would slip off and end up
someplace else. We all know it.

GRACE LIES IN HER TENT AND TALKS TO THE PSYCHIATRIC
EXPERTS SHE SAW ON TV

The day before I moved out of the house
I share with my boyfriend and into this tight
new shape in our backyard,
I walked into a bookstore.
Every page said the same thing:
true crime was self help.
Back home I turned on the TV
to the usual panels of open-mouthed women.
You guys sat next to them with your heads
stuck out past your knees,
as if explaining required contortions.

I admit I began by thinking of the bedroom as a box
and of the house as a big blue package.
I began by feeling like a lousy present.
Folded in sheets like a surprise
in tissue paper—*Look,*
you could say,
a little ceramic bitch.
Can you see her itzy-bitsy scowl right there?

I was almost a famous woman once.
For a year and a half.
I was the woman who has a face and two hands.
I lived in a house
I saw myself shrunk
in the flashes of all our faucets.
I wore weak light spilled through
a cracked door for makeup.
Of course my hands were swollen;
I had to keep my pulse somewhere.
The thumping would have been ugly in my face.

Yes, I do remember how I became threatening.
I was lying in bed.
I was trying to forget that my swollen hands
could feel each muscle in my boyfriend's neck

when he swallowed. That's when I knew
I could be famous, the woman with her hands
around a lover's throat.

Even outside, the strangest, smallest things
make me wonder what he did to deserve it. Chickadees
with their beaks clamped
to the tips of each other's wings.
A few pine needles
sticking like hairs out of the snow.
Not that I actually killed him or even leaned
on his Adam's apple to push myself out of bed.
But it's a crime against something
to want to hurt him.
I think of the need for control
epitomized by Dan Rather's hair, the encouraging pluck
of Connie Chung's eyebrow. All January
the two of them tried to console me.
I confessed that what he did and deserves
aren't the right questions.
I hate the publicity,
always hearing about the lady just like me.

You lean over your feet in an attempt
to come out of the TV.
As experts you say *Well, well.*
Should I take away the line
that makes the side of the house?
Should I turn the line up at the ends and make a sled,
our whole life pulled by dogs.
That would make things move.

In our backyard, I kiss the back of my hand.
My knuckles are the features of his face.

TAP DANCING ON TAPES

(i)

Come on by the studio
and listen to tap dancing
on tapes, the old man says.
He plays Jelly Roll Morton
Duke Ellington. He talks
Bojangles Nicholas Brothers.
Sshh now, listen....
I listen: Who was that?
I don't know, he says.

His sculptures range along
the walls: geometry of fitted
curves, Degas-black: shapes
bowed as laundresses, some
ballerina-arched, or simply
lateral, stretching beyond
frames of what you expect.
Ten inches to be blown up
sixty feet, he says. Sshh:

(ii)

She dances on pretty feet
swirl, slide, turn, tap.
I'm going blind, she says.
More than the last time here.
Now I can't see my face to
put my make-up on. I had
a boy to help me but he's
dying of what the boys
are dying of.

Collecting images barely
visible by now, she finds a
vulva petalled by leaves,
sumptuous, trembling, open.

6th Century? 7th? When?
South Asia? Polynesia?
Her celebrated murals on
a theatre wall burned down
in World War II.

(iii)

Her feet move, his sculpture
moves, age stops, above the
roof the sky is furred with
trees. Sshh listen:

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.

Chelsea Bolan

LANGUAGE IS FAILING

—Jack B. Yeats

A single stroke of Scarlet Vermilion or Lake
is a piercing pain, and instant stab
to the heart. It burns into
the canvas and keeps burning,
never healing like a burn
to the wrist does—it is inside you
before any word or sentence
could reach you, smoldering in the blood,
pulsing with your pulse.

Or take
flecks of Aureolin, the joy
of Cadmium spreading across faces
or buried in the cropped hair
of horses, sneaking up
the aisles of trams. There is
this light even in the darkest
of places, the grimmest silences.
Without a single word
you feel the intense cold and wet
of Cerulean, Chinese Blue, the loneliness
of oceans, the grief of Prussian Blue
seeps deep into the cores
of your bones.

Then somewhere
in the water, you see a hint
of Cobalt Green, a small wisp
or smudge of it, a calm spot
rising out of a maddened sea—
perhaps it rolls to you
in the waves while you look out
on Deer Island, or any island;
perhaps it wells up
in the spring tide. And that

is how I speak to you,
with nothing between us
but clear water.

Dennis Hinrichsen

Two Poems

WORKING AT CHILDREN'S

To look in the patient's eyes was an accomplishment
in those days,
to look deeply and not

turn away, to hold my face so steadily
before theirs
a weld was formed—no matter how far

into illness they had fallen, or how bitter
their exhalations
(always the flare of antiseptics and sour

excrement). Even to offer a kindness,
to find
some joke to break apart the hours;

then later, to cradle an 80-pound body just returned
from biopsy,
to help sponge the arterial flow.

Oddnesses, daily and everywhere: the diabetic
grinning
as each week they amputated

another jot of leg, the bandaged stump finally swinging
at just above
his knee like a muted bell.

And the woman I startled once as she was dressing,
her nakedness
stunningly green in the fluorescent light,

her neck brace barely able to stem
her hateful glance.
She eventually forgave me—I was an orderly

after all—and even tipped me
for being kind—
a coil of dollars I took to soothe her

but was too ashamed to count.
It was her back,
a nurse had told, meaning *mind*, then winked.

I winked. The dollars wadded moist,
a spent bandage,
around my keys. And in the children's ward

now and then, miraculously, a child,
broken
by some backward song of the genes,

often tied down and strapped to prevent
an accidental choking.
I held them when I could. I gazed once

into the face of an infant epileptic,
his nearly constant seizure
clouding his astonished eyes.

It amazes me still today how he rocked
and rocked
through it, as if he were possessed

of a beneficent, untranslatable god,
and terror
only what I felt, what I layered over

his incessant shivering. On Ward A,
the hard men
flung from Harleys, jawed like paper cutouts

from pickups and flaming Bonneville's,
their heads caved in
or rattled silly, each delicate, crushed joint

held together with plaster and stainless steel prongs.
Each morning
I'd cross the river

to cart these patients to X-ray or Chemotherapy,
to Sigmoid
or Pulmonary Function,

to have their brains scanned or stomachs probed,
or their entire
bodies flipped and held suspended

while surgeons fed a luminous decay
to their exposed
groins. How they'd bravely press their chests

and lungs into each new machine,
their faces pale,
nearly breathless, and then draw back slumped.

Not only their bodies, but their fluids too,
I transported
from clinic to clinic: sick blood

and urine, cloudy fluid painfully siphoned
from the viscera.
And each scent vivid

despite the constant mopping. An astringent
iodine,
something rank and viral drying.

The same smells maybe that might have lured Whitman
to bend among
the wounded, the smears of palm-edge,

the hand-grips that ringed my arms, the patients
healing
or sickening regardless, me

entering the well-scrubbed rooms; them gazing
with pain-softened
eyes, hesitant, expectant; then abruptly turning away.

(Orthopedics, University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics, 1975)

CHILDHOOD

Sometimes I think I am already there and memory just
the crude agent used
to have time more reluctantly

spread this wheat-colored shine
(and sometimes
I am just downriver dragging a stick;

from the wires a bird crying *seek, hide-and-go-see*;
stay hidden—
high harmonica sheen

of the skyline, a dome, really,
one swart wind
leaking, insignificant, out of a culvert).

Such fine days, angelic memory.
Wind blurring
each pane of glass with coagulant rain.

A radio blaring; muse of song, bitch of static.
How raw wood
pierced my tongue once until what emerged

was oak language, blood language. My heart in my head
most days,
hands scarred from where bark

had torn me. I remember pissing now
against
a wooden fence and sucking nails, rubbing

the tip of a monarch's wing to a saffron lens,
the yard bloodshot,
fractured, when I coined my eye: there,

in simmering daylight, a child pumped
a tire once
until it exploded, then, mindless, idly plucked

the warped spokes until they rang; the bird
in the apple
crying *seek, seek, hide-and-*

go-see; *stay hidden* (the autobio-
graphic: *how the child was happy*
then, and wasn't wronged and not

one thing stirred that was not complete).

COMMITTED HERE

She touches to her lips
the rubies of concertos.
She lights the way with a scar.
She truly knows
how good it is to breathe.

Let us applaud
the vicinity of her left eyebrow.
In the original bath,
in the darkest recess of the womb
she refused to die.

With perfect pitch
she sets fire after fire
to a network of veins,
relinquishing all thought.
The cave lights up.

Silence takes center stage
like cut glass eyes
set in bronze.
She rides the waves
serious as an olive tree.

She has an aura of plutonium
ticking out the dawn.
She sings to the edge of the mind.
A dove flies from her mouth
without martyrdom.

MY STORY

It is spring in the palace of disbelief. At night, I slip past
the guards to feed the fish in the courtyard fountain, to listen
as their small mouths grope the surface. A command performance.
I let my arms drop theatrically when I'm done. All around me

is the sound of wind in the stones, a flourish of wind on water,
the lights rippling. The train yard below me a few white windows,
and then, further in the background, the city, which even now

glows like dawn. The early train is elsewhere still, and dark.
It is a penny in my pocket. It is the exact shape of grief.
Is paradise the mind not in search of an equivalent? Not saying
this? Not saying? My hands come back wet from smoothing the folds
of the caryatid's dress. In the dark, her eyes are bigger, less

focused. They are the fog that comes in from the woods, the fog
that hides the gardener's shed from the carriage house, the fog
that hides *me* from *her*. I count the mother of pearl buttons
on my nightdress, one of which is missing. The rain is warm tonight,
its smell on everything, thick as milk. And the trees

are budding. I have yet to hear someone say *It is enough*
and I wonder—is it? Tonight I will dream that my friend and I
ride bikes into the city park, and that she, abandoning me for a sound
under some bush, cries out once, and is lost.
The park is empty. I fall asleep on a stone bench

near the gate, and in the morning, I have to buy my clothes
back from an old woman in the alley—my muddy boots,
my damp overcoat. My bike is gone. When I walk out of the park,
the moon shows faint in a tree-lined corridor
of sky. I stop once on my way home, to step over

a clump of black ants swarming something in the gutter.
I have nothing further to add about my childhood.

THE RELEVANCE OF OBJECTS

Tonight the rain shakes me, its measure all depth
and no perspective, no horizon, which is the line

we draw ourselves by. I set the dollhouse table
alone, unstacking plates with one hand, emptying
the Blue Rose matchbox of silverware
with the other. The wine bottle fits
in an upturned thimble.

In the streets below me, men are arguing
over new ideas about the war. Is this my perch,
my lookout? Twilight's short blue lull fills
the window. A bed of thieves. A shallow
grave. It reminds me
of the way the rain moves on
without announcing its departure—
the way it avoids crescendo, which means to make of pain
a finer pain, a transcendence.
I whisper the word interstice to myself,

remembering a blue-gray moth
I found once, tucked in a squash blossom.
The entire geometry of language is unfolding
before me. Or is it the geography of time?
Blue-gray moth, squash blossom.
Tonight this town is a dream
something else is having—a dream of valleys
and high snow, of the horses and their reckless
inaccessibility. An inhuman dream, and we

fill it. We are in it like shade.

Was it only yesterday that I watched
the jugglers in the park?
They started with fruit, then juggled torches,
then balls made with twigs
and hair and paper—balls so light
they hovered for seconds before settling
in their palms. Imagine the juggler's faith!

I was thinking of the wisdom of Solomon.
I was thinking of my own
disconsolate moments. The oranges not
returning. The warm, green air.

HOTEL

You are translating something which means
the lost houses. It is a gray day—
the clouds are charcoal, the few open
spots of blue have been sewn in.
You think the phrase means to leave the body,
to go on without it, as if the idea were related
to the sound of a river, of the way the river
has two lives, one presence, one not.
Here is a painting you could inhabit.
Out the window, the mountains fold into
the lake the way the mist folds around
the mountains. On a postcard with the same view
you make a list of the most difficult things.
It is impossible to see the peaks.
This is the place you've come with questions
of your own mortality.
This is a catalog of your complaints.
Why does the door open onto the lake?
Why is the lake a cold blue plain,
immovable, empty? You are translating
something. Tonight you play chess
with the immortals in their rooftop garden.
A cat stalks lightning bugs
down in the June grass which is damp and still
holds the impression of your feet.

JACK-IN-THE-PULPIT

Herbalists say the taste
is bitter as any sermon.
The root, I mean, or
tuber. The Shrovetide

sermon. And here
in the cul-de-sac where
laurels crowd out sunlight,
I found one stalk opening

its spathe like a cowl
to show the jack in his
white robe narrow
as a warning finger.

All green arc and pious
symmetry without
medicinal use, it seemed
to admonish like Father

Mike hot with the Gospel.
The Epistles, he said,
would scald the tongues
of sinners, and every

impure thought was
a turnpike to hell, but
the lesson was lost
along with the plant's

evangelistic force
when birdsong high
in the cedars psalmed
out, mint-sweet

and oblivious to scripture,
leaving the preacher

looking radish-common
and not likely to do

anyone a whit of good
on either the forest
path or what Saint Gertrude
called the road to rapture.

RACCOON IN THE SUN GARDEN

Trimming the redbud whose
splendor was just right
back in April, I gave

the white hollyhocks
a shot at sunlight, as who
would begrudge their

skin-sheer petals access
to radiant July? I have,
after all, a steady good

time meddling in that
garden not of my own
making and never find

more trouble there
than paper wasps or
a black racer, but what

rushed through my rash
mind when I saw
bright eyes amid

the blossoming hosta
was this: what if his
mother (blackberrying

downhill, I guessed)
took offense at my

presence? He gazed

steadily at my face then,
as if to prove himself
no menace, the still

fire of his fur turning mild,
and when I saw him weeks
later by the meadow

rill cleaning a fingerling
rainbow with his forepaws,
he gave me no sign.

Now in raw autumn
the hollyhocks
have risen to resplendence,

and this morning under
the birch turning gold
I found handprints

with small claws, evidence
of his scavenger's
existence, though I can't

say if his animation amid
the torn marigolds is kin
to mine or just some restless

sign of the season. At night
he gnaws the rake handle
to taste or, maybe, annihilate

every trace of my salt.

HARDWARE SPARROWS

Out for a deadbolt, light bulbs
and two-by-fours, I find a flock
of sparrows safe from hawks

and weather under the roof
of Lowe's amazing discount
store. They skitter from the racks

of stockpiled posts and hoses
to a spill of winter birdseed
on the concrete floor. How

they know to forage here,
I can't guess, but the automatic
door is close enough,

and we've had a week
of storms. They are, after all,
ubiquitous, though poor,

their only song an irritating
noise, and yet they soar
to offer, amid hardware, rope

and handyman brochures,
some relief, as if a flurry
of notes from Mozart swirled

from seed to ceiling, entreating
us to set aside our evening
chores and take grace where

we find it, saying it is possible,
even in this month of flood,
blackout and frustration,

to float once more on sheer
survival and the shadowy
bliss we exist to explore.

Christine Gebhard

AGAINST GROUND

Too long alone inside on an afternoon
too radiant to stay estranged from,
I tool around on my bicycle, lamenting

these suburbs, their lack of scenery
chaste or savage enough to sharpen
the edge I dream is still in me.

Past woods and fields minced into yards
and drives, cars hang on my heels—
polite as guests avoiding the obvious—

then suddenly accelerate and roar by.
Their limits stick in my throat like the dust
that trails winter sand, though I too

am out just to pass things by. On a lot
facing the blank mask of an office park,
I spot a little ballerina—

head crowned, hips circled in palest chiffon—
running hard to a roadside mailbox.
What unlikely scene has she slipped from

or is she staring in? I cut my pace
to flesh out the cast: a colony of phlox
slogs through a cut-over field;

a black moth kisses the pavement a second
before both are fed to my wheels.
Up a hill, I spin so slowly I'm awash

in wings, as my sweat seeds a cloud.
A mysterious click plagues the derailleur,
turning the whoosh of Why, why?

into *Why that?* What *that?* Why *that?*
Downshifting, I fear I'm fated to ascend
on foot when a riff of "Heart and Soul"

pulls me up as it tumbles from an ugly house,
and having little room left to bargain
with failure, I discover the luck of the town's

last three horses in a whitewashed ring
is enough to silence the click and send me—a log
shooting rapids—rolling down into the cool.

Looping back, I find roofers amidst pungent tar,
hammering in unison at the home of friends.
Their daughter's concern harp turns one window

into a stage. At five, before ever seeing
a harp, she told strangers she knew how
to play, having lived once before as an angel.

But that was years ago, before hemlocks
along our street sprouted luxuriant arms.
Now finches and sparrows appear to believe

in them, and their pointed shade lifts me
through the difficult truth of skin's
long memory adhering to everything.

On the last leg, yellow pollen coats
the tires as I bend over my knees, straining
against spinning, against ground.

CONCEALING COLORATION

"Oh Louis! won't you try once making a background wholly out of the bird's colors: Just his actual color-notes as you paint them."

—Gerald Thayer, letter to Louis Agassiz Fuertes, 1908

Paint this. The plover, its markings, lost
in a spray of twigs and summer leaves.
The white-throated quail dove poised on a fallen
log, the low-grasses, ferns, a disguise
my water colors dare hardly match.
A Wilson's Tern on its nest, the marshy
ground a shadow for the mottled-brown,
dusky and gray costume. Or Scotch Grouse,
hidden among the sage and heathers.
When what's demanded, what must be portrayed
is the bird itself. Its colorations.
Out hunting, I bring down a sora, barely visible
in the olive-colored sedge. Paint this.
The bird as in life. Not its skin
stretched and loosely stuffed, as artifice
might pose it on a branch, but in mid-
flight, beak open, wings ajar.
I stroke its feathers, purring, crooning.
Its eyes fast losing what colors might
beat warm as blood, the flush, translucent,

ebbing now. I must memorize it,
quickly. The blur of ink, pigments,
the wingspan, its body emerging
from my brush tip, more emotion than substance.
And birds my passion. The frog's view
of a heron, the crouching hare's of an eagle
is not mine. To paint it though is
a canvas trick. The background obscure
enough to hide from enemy or prey.
Woodcocks mistaken for the vines
where I spy them. Short-eared owls
nesting on sun-dried grasses, their shading
a perfect match. Their survival depends

on mimicking the changes each season.
I'm a collector of these landscapes, birds.
Working and re-working the jay,
the sparrowhawk, the blue merging with reds,
no distinct line anywhere. Paint this.
A curved surface, shadow of a flower,
the softness in the phoebe's tufted crest.

A GOOD DISSONANCE FOR A MAN

—composer Charles E. Ives, *vacations*
at Elk Lake, N.Y., 1911

I prop my papers up with my knees,
notes for a new sonata,
when I should enjoy myself, watch
bathers over by the shore,
should relax, like the families
picnicking nearby, their laughter
counterpoint to my work.
My father taught me the value
of odd, unusual sounds everywhere,
even at the lake, and how
they become music. A hymn to the earth.
Only it comes out in a strange
key, tinkered-with, not right.
But, somehow it is.
Suddenly I'm blessed with the shade
of Harmony's parasol,
sweet wife, her voice as she reads
a poem she's just composed.

The shouts of children playing by the lake
get caught in her voice, my notes,
and those old gospel hymns I sang
at revival meetings, the worshippers,
all of us let-out souls, swaying
together, in song, our prayers
coming in great waves across the scales,
the music bigger than us,
some in tune, others gloriously not so,

while my father, the band leader,
conducts us with his clarinet.

He always loved our dissonance.
Our beautiful misplaced notes penetrating
heavenward, to the low-anchored
clouds, the infinite.

Why can't it always be so easy? Hearing
a sound I've heard before, say
the evening train to Hartford,
its whistle vibrating across the valley,
or on Sunday, the church bells
imparting a melody onto the land.
Why can't I play this on our old parlor piano?
The woods bathed in a wondrous light.
I want to breathe my own symphonies,
and not just scribble down these passages
as Harmony drowns beside me.

While in my head Beethoven's chords,
fate knocking, bangs on the keyboard
with scraps of songs
I weave into each movement.

Such grace I find here with Harmony,
dusk settling on the water,
the banks, elm trees. Both of us
enraptured at how easily
we lose ourselves in each other,
in these sounds. A joy
in our marriage, the noisy songs
I compose, their chaos father'd love.
Harmony wakes, shooing away a bee.

I suppose we should go
and dress for dinner, but why leave
this exuberant world by the lake,
its spirited fanfare made of tunes
that come to us in flashes, light
through the trees gathering every
strange note, while through my fingers
a commonplace music steals in.

Oliver Rice

THE AGENT

I have returned
this time
with an old six-shooter,
some curious incidents from down east,

and a sense of how many out there
are ambitious to be philistines.
A mockingbird followed me all over the South.

It is not like anything anywhere,
driving through the night in Indiana, Oklahoma,
unanswerable songs on the air,
unimaginable hometowns out in the hills.

Not like anything anywhere,
the ferocious nostalgia off season at the dude ranch.
Or the Amish in their fields.

Tomorrow again
they will be having refried beans for breakfast.
Tucking the faces in surgery.
Dusk will come across the prairie toward the stranger
like a doom.

From Stone Mountain Robert E. Lee
will look down his colossal nose.
Dead grama grass will tremble on the desert.

From every antenna
on the used car lot in Columbus
a tiny stars and stripes will fly.

There's no day off on welfare,
said the lady selling lottery tickets.

◦

Still, there are mornings along the interstates
in the Tidewater, the Badlands, the Blue Grass,
that will promise you anything.
Watching a heron rise from a gravel bar,
the mound builder surely knew.
And Tocqueville, peering from his carriage window
at the lives the Cajuns were inventing.

◦

In Chapel Hill they told me
the human spirit is up for grabs.

◦

In the reveries that drift
from the balconies and the taverns,
they are back in the old neighborhoods,
starting over,
 the tax cheats,
 the ghost writers,
 the sublimated lovers,
 the bewildered technocrats.

◦

Up in the mesas they tell coyote tales.
Tie knots in a string and burn it.

◦

I begin to see the blood lines surging ashore,
straggling across Virginia, down the Ohio,
toward Vegas and Salt Lake.

To see how it happened that Tuscaloosa
has such an idea of itself.

Why the averaged man can go demonic
on a business weekend in Chicago.

◦

Everywhere there are intimations of the old countries.

In the gravies, the disquietudes.

In the face peering from the car in the next lane.

In the notions that skitter
among the stacks of the Carnegie Public.

◦

I have a snapshot of the canyon
where Butch Cassidy trailed his stolen horses,
where he submitted to the guiles of sleep
and woke to childhood skies.
In these mountains the wildflowers
come and go in three weeks.

◦

They are an ingenious people
considering how they despise intellect.

◦

You must take into account
the towns that died,

the Pawnees cruising the freeways,

the next election,

the selves dressed as top people,
semi drivers,
backup singers, parish priests,

the night sounds,

how the willets fling themselves into the wind,

how free enterprise prowls the counties,

how, long afterward in the wrong towns,
they tell their stories to the barkeeps.

◦

Next week again
they will be conspiring
in the motel across the Potomac.

The assistant professor
will be describing
how Massa came to the cabin.

How the Adams family
earned the right
for Henry to condemn society.

Why the sniper
trains his crosshairs
on the leader of the marathon.

•

The cities wait, hostages to disaster,
explosions in their guts,
flaming riot, famine, plague.

•

In the entry of the Japanese restaurant
was a dwarf evergreen, tinsel.

•

It may be raining on the expresidents.
The NFL.

The failing spouses.
The money men.

On the hill where Emerson is buried,
Thoreau, Hawthorne, and the Alcotts.

On those who have not kept their bargains.

On the dark ethnics and the pink complected.

Robert Wrigley

Three Poems

LOST

Once, miles up Kelly Creek, walking back
to camp at the night edge of dusk,
I thought I heard a horn.
The slopes above me rattled with deer
bound down for bed and forage,
for the still-green foliage of the bottoms,
far from any road, a saxophone,
not just any sax, but Archie Shepp's soprano
playing "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child."
Horace Parlan's piano was gone, only
the sidemen of water over stones,
the delicate notes of the night birds.

I was moving toward it, a mourning
deep as the river of all blood.
From the cattailed brink of a boggy meadow,
out of the tules and reeds, a horn
to shame a trumpeting angel, no walls
to blow down, just the bars
of an orphaned soul, a loneliness
no coyote or wolf could imagine.

From the trail I looked down and saw him.
Silhouetted by his fire, clothed in robes
of shadow, breath-smoke swirling
from the bell, he played,

and I listened, then went on,
walking the worst stretches of trail
by matchlight, by the braille of boot
and stick. Behind me a wind came along,
bringing the music with it,
and I wandered, uncertain,
no fire of my own to guide me back,
though a star, an early star, Venus

I think, flashed once off a tent pole—
one glint, like a key in a beam of light—
and I was there: my forest home,
where I would curl alone.

LAZARUS

Eventually the fly awakens, whirring
in the furrow of the cabin window.
It's winter outside, a berm of snow
seven feet high kisses the glass
alongside him, and yet he stirs, thawing
gradually out of sleep, that icy rumor
of demise. It seems wrong
then, to dispatch him, the cavalier smack
of the swatter an affront
to his durable life force, maggotry
and revenance, little Lazarus with wings.

But he's only the first of probable thousands.
By nightfall all the room will sizzle,
the tacky pest strip bejeweled
as a papal vestment, and the tatter
of their rising, battering the silver clouds
on the ceiling insulation like the footsteps
of would-be angels. There are no indulgences
but death. Therefore, the hand of God
is a plastic mesh in puce, with an undertaker's logo.
See here the insect robe, the tissue shroud,
the stove that roars an all-consuming fire.

WITHOUT SIN

The more miserable the weather, the happier
ravens become, iridescent pairs
parsing out their caws like giddy interjections,
like boys flushed with the power
of their first goddamns. Let it be said

they are without sin, these clerics
of carrion, these denizens of the dumps.

What can they know of winter dill
or rodent woe, the eagle's leavings
dangling from a pine tree's spar?
It's imagination that complicates
the commandments, what the mind's eye sees
the gizzard will mulch. Here's lunch,
my love, this runover marmot,

its visceral steam a candle's flicker.
And so, sated, they celebrate and sing
a song of rot and rust,
the snowy, crepuscular dawn a blessing,
and roost awhile above the dying hunter,
calling the coyotes in, those chefs
who howl, leaving a garnish of dry grass.

Derick Burleson

CATASTROPHE ON SIXTH STREET

At the core of the day, a demolition
derby driver fresh back from the derby
in Plains tried to pass me on the left
while I was changing lanes, crumpled
my pickup door like the skulls
long-dead Samson crushed with the jawbone

of an ass. While Montana spiraled through
its arm of the Milky Way, the few Pabst
Blue Ribbons I had not already drunk
that Sunday afternoon silently turned
to foam on the passenger's side, cold
under steel caps. My parents confessed

not long ago I was a child unprepared for,
an after-church mistake on the '62 Ford's
back seat, the egg accepting one among
spiral galaxies of sperm. While black
holes gnawed through any belts of matter
they could find, funneling energy

through time like water under Hoover Dam,
Skoog sauntered down from his upstairs
bachelor's pad to see what all the racket
was about. Quarks crashed through his nuclei,
but he didn't seem to mind. The demolition
derby driver's boot abused his well-used

Chevy, the crumpled steel fender of which
must have felt happy to know it was headed
for the crusher. The rest of the universe
expanded toward one more agonized contraction,
and in the nexus of nearly-fused hydrogen,
new stars birthing new constellations.

This is why we buy insurance: the late sun
surely was in everybody's eyes that day.

Skoog and I went fishing anyway, opened
and sipped foamy beers, cast to rainbow trout
that couldn't resist rising while molten yellow
leaves struggled a bit, then hissed into the river.

Kevin Craft

IMPRESSIONISM

On the first day they mowed
the waist-high meadow down.

I took my hands from my sleeves
to walk out into the beaten field.

It was like doing handstands
on a thatched cottage roof

in medieval Languedoc.
A few coins slipped from my pockets—

and confetti, a blank note
someone had drawn

a crisp fedora on: all posy
sifting down through the straw.

I could now hear the soft
cries of women huddled around

black kettles. I could hear
rats chewing into the wood.

Over the yellow hill, the rattling
of trundles, and wheel-ruts

trembling with dust.
On the first day they mowed

NORTHWEST

the waist-high meadow down
it was like looking through a haystack

with the heart crossed, one hand
tied behind the back.

And then the hopeless pact to die.
I walked out into the beaten field,

barely a flicker
in the needle's wayward eye.

Albert Goldbarth

Two Poems

ALTERNATIVE USES

...while exploring a branch of the Victoria River, in North Australia, we halted, as usual, at noon, with scanty rations, which Mr. Gregory improved by taking from his hat a stout sewing needle, softening it in the fire, and bending it into a fish-hook, baited with grasshoppers.

-19th century travel account

It will often be found useful to carry a bottle of cold tea, nothing is so effectual for thirst. Experienced travellers frequently carry in their holsters, instead of pistols: in the one, a tiny teapot with a paper of tea, and in the other, a cup and a paper of sugar. And in those days friends would always seem amazed when they suddenly opened my refrigerator and found—because I eat my meals in neighborhood cafés and hated to see good shelf space wasted, and because I wanted these stacks of nuisance out of sight as rapidly as my red pen could complete them—mounds of graded Composition 101 assignments. (And once, in 103°, a lover's folded lingerie.)

He needed to pretend to be straight, in order to be promoted; and she had a proven record

of being exactly that, with a skillful ardor. She needed startup backing for the catering shop she dreamed of; and, the heartless bastard, he'd devoted his life to squeezing money out of others. He needed a legal reason to stay in the United States, once his card expired; she needed a father for the baby, any father. She hated her overrestrictive fundamentalist parents; he was surely a pile of nasty habits looking for a container to stain. He had his agenda, she had hers, and they coincided along a delicate line. And so they took each other in holy matrimony.

Hoping this finds you well. There is so little in the way of news I am almost ashamed to write, but for the obligation I feel to one who is himself such a prompt correspondent.

The garden is declaring itself already this season in butter-yellows and blues that look as if they want to wave hello all the way to Turners Crossing and Hill Fork. Oh, there is a new pastor, sorrily NOT a real rouser of a sermonizer. Yours, as ever, Imojean T.

The post card is from 1912, and brittle enough so that its penny stamp is chipping off, and the spidery message, hidden under it, says
Hot kisses to my honey boy.

“HI!”

And I will be ambushed. I will be anointed with a shpritz of *Dare*. I will be in the mens accessories aisle lollygagging my quiet eventual way to office supplies, when suddenly a saleswoman will pitch her ware with a pinch of the rubber atomizer. I will be a man in a cloud. I will be the solid around which weather fumes and fractals. The weather is daring. The weather is also *Storm*, is *Knight*, is *Hunter's Call*. And I will be coated in this,

and I will be a field of invisible snapping
chemical reactions. And my skin, that loves
the intimate voluptuary grazing of a pair of lips,
that shrivels at the thought of the physician's blade,
that beads the bathtub water, yes this skin
will be a set of various open possibilities
to the subatomic realm, and on that level
winds will roll through me, and change me,
and in turn be changed themselves
by smutching contact with my molecules.
I will bear a foofoo reek. It will be
an olfactory banner, strung from me and swaying
like a Chinese New Year's Dragon in the breeze.
In the breeze of *Arabia*, in the wafted attar of *Wild Glen*.
In *Rodeo*. In *Sensua*. And I will bear this
sign for days, and soap will pale in front of it,
and the flesh will fall to the bed at night
and rise in the morning griping to me that its work
is to contain and to repel, but that it fails in this,
and it bows like wheat, and it trumpets forth
imploringly like the morning glories, it interacts
with every degree of the temperature, shucked oyster,
breast of ocean, velvet antler, peeled shriek of nerve,
in *Lancer*, in *Aura*, in *Nuts'nBolts*, in *Everlasting Glory Flames*.

Sharon Hashimoto

WHAT I WOULD ASK MY HUSBAND'S DEAD FATHER

You are sifted and smoothed to each corner of a small
white box, the lid snugged down and tight.
Your resting place is a closet. For now, until
the family decides. Should you be scattered
among pines and firs, or let loose to follow
the tides in Puget Sound? We've waited for over
a year.

Perhaps, there are some things we can't
decide. What's missing is more than 98 percent water,
the spirit steamed from the body, the common sight
of your head slowly nodding as you slumped in sleep
on the living room couch. Perhaps, we can't imagine you
romanticized: a fine scarf of your ashes dusting
the mountain crags. You live in photographs
of Christmas, hands holding up the shoulders
of another flannel shirt.

Spines compact as we age;
a body settles. Like my own shrinking parents,
you never said what you wanted done with you.
Should there be a headstone beside your mother's?
There is no Catholic God or Buddha for my own father.
He won't honor a wake, food for the departed. He tells me:
"It's up to you. When I'm dead, I'm dead. I won't know
the difference."

I'm not sure what I believe.
When I was eight, I heard someone say the spirits
of the dead are all around us. Such a crowded city.
As I strayed beyond our yard, I wondered about
the grandfather, lost in a landslide. What would he say
of my not answering when I was called. Was that why
the stilled and stinking dog, lying beside the road,
stared up at me with its one clear eye?

VOLANT

I remember all those butterflies I caught
in a handmade net. Cupped in my hands,
I lowered them gently into the killing jar,
where they succumbed before beating
any of the precious dust from their wings,
great spangled fritillary, red admiral and morning cloak,
zebra swallowtail, collecting one of each species
indigenous to the state of Missouri, praised
by school teachers and scout leaders,
written up in the local papers, proud
of my improbable feat. Too easily, though,
I lost interest, leaving the display case in the basement
where ants ate away the bodies, reducing
my collection of butterflies to a pile of assorted wings.
Somehow I never considered saving the wings,
or making them into a collage the way Dubuffet did.
I just took them outside, scattered them in the wind
where they blew away across the yard,
over the fence, and into the street, where
one or another may have hit the windshield of a passing car,
the driver inside having a brief pang
of hurt or regret, but deciding it was only a dead leaf
and driving on. Then without thinking
I rubbed my face with my hands, the colored dust
of those lost wings marking me as volant,
as one who could fly away if given half a chance,
to this day the dust still under my eyes,
at the edge of my mouth, saying
he could become wind again at any moment,
if not approached with care,
if startled, or stared at too long.

JACKET

In the wind-rip coming off the bay,
through the roar of trucks on the highway,
and sleet become rain, along
sidewalks mottled with spit

and old gum, trash barrels set ablaze
beneath the overpass, walk-ups
and fire-escapes, where the shadows
are made from the worn-down heels of shoes

and the black sighs of eightballs called
and dropped in side or corner pockets,
payphone and no one home, hiring halls
and the tavern's last call, shotgun shell

spun round in a shotglass, manhole covers
stuck like slugs in the pinball machine
of the skyline, my jacket the color
of coming home after 3 a.m., not the flanks

of the wolf or a harrier's wings, I move
inside of it without a predator's deadly ease
but as simple animal equal to the wilderness
of verticality, past windows that can't see

me and the sewers deaf to my footsteps,
inside of this jacket I know I won't starve,
I know this jacket as a kind of hide
sufficient to any night, nothing so cold

or so long you cannot dig your hands
down a little deeper into its pockets,
zip it up just a bit more, over the bare throat,
all the way up under the chin.

EPIC

I.

The wrath, the hardening of the heart, the grief, the crushing grief, the wild revenge, all the hacked flesh, river clotted with blood, the whining gods, the handsome athletic men unstrung, the panic, the shame, the stone certainty of divine treachery, the feast of fatigue, the prisoners, the pyre, the games, the fresh rage and the dust-impacted corpse, the night, the wagon, the fearful hands washed by tears, the hard bread and the bitter wine, the dark future lit by a thousand fires.

II.

The boy, the resentment, the wide world, the man weeping by the sea, the man pounded by the sea, the man crusted with sea foam, sea salt, the girl,

the improbable stories, memories aching like old wounds, the necessary treasure taken for granted but never uncounted,

the familiar stony places, the arrogant youths, the bright blood on the palace walls, the sulfur and the washing and the terrified sobbing, the dainty feet reaching for earth's relief,

the just bed, solid bed, bed full of words, of man and woman fleshed unfamiliar by time, finding ways back through each other,

the father bent in the orchard, sunlight a blur of tears, the withered warmth of the old man's embrace, the final babble of angry voices, the sword hilt eternal,

even as the goddess freezes this gut, that gut into frightened peace, the ready eye

undaunted, the sturdy gladness of the wily heart.

III.

A borrowed storm, the familiar unfamiliar shore, much talk of a future greatness, the whole bloody story there on the wall, the whole bloody story there at the banquet, visions and searchings, etc., etc., and the queen is burning.

Thunder, the cave that's more than shelter, but the tarred keel cuts through the water, and the queen burns. Games, the future presiding. One overboard to make a point, one momentous descent into the thick murk, implored, snubbed, dubbed illustrious, fathered not to make bronze breathe or words fly or to measure the spangled meanings of the night sky but for law and concrete order, to battle down the haughty

and be them. Off now, to eat those tables, scout the humble king's humble hill, and kill, kill, and—that's right—kill.

THAT BEAUTY IN THE TREES

You have a life glowing, you like to say, with beauty, truth, goodness, and health, a life of not exactly poverty, and you are not really old. This November day, you and your love turn early from the keyboards and ringing phones and go walking hand in hand through the respectable neighborhood.

Have

the leaves ever been brighter? Someone is

burning the fallen ones against the law,
or is that your happy childhood curling
out of the deepest layers of your brain?
(You do not think "soul".)

Perhaps you say,
"That beauty in the trees was always there.
It's just that the fullness of living had
hidden it." Your love smiles as if to say,
Tell me more, *O professore!* Therefore,
you do: "I mean, the various greens were their
active lives, their consuming of the sunlight,
their making of the molecules that keep
them going"—

and now, the florid maples
sprayed with amethyst, the ocher oaks and
crimson dogwoods, the incandescent jasmine
of the hickories, the carmine fan of this
sassafras flaring in the Salmacis-clutch
of a scarlet woodbine can thrill any
lovers' stroll into baffled tears.

Why can't you
feel this all the time, whatever it is?

After a while, you might say, jauntily,
to recover the lightness, "The trees have
lost their relentless greenbacks, begin to live
on their small pensions, prepare to become
winter's dark skeletons, and so the yellows
and vermilion and magentas, the flashing
dazzles that have been there all along flame out
like—what?—like the spirits of honest old men
who wear their wives' useless breasts, like the spirits
of strong, tender women who've grown wispy
mustaches."

She likes the men and women
becoming each other. Spirits, she says,
with the sidelong look that means you must

declare, "Sure. Your whole life is a kind of retina:
You can see their spirits, even if spirits
can't survive the death of the flesh. Anymore
than these colors can survive December."

For the moment, you believe what you're saying.

And are there such good people? "Oh yes,"
you have to say, "for all your smiling.
The ones not like us: the quiet, simple
people who've struggled every day for their food
and clothing and shelter, who've lived only
for their children and grandchildren."

And who turn
now away from the sunlight, you suddenly
want to say, because it turns away from them,
and who begin to burn with the deep silent anger
that we must say, we do say, we will always say
is a kind of beauty.

About Our Contributors

CATIE ROSEMURGY lives in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

PADMA HEJMADI is a writer, photographer, and visual artist living in Davis, California.

CHELSEA BOLAN lives in Seattle.

DENNIS HINRICHSEN lives in Lansing, Michigan. His second book was *The Rain That Falls This Far* (Galileo Press, 1991).

ELISABETH MURAWSKI lives in Alexandria, Virginia.

FRANCESCA ABBATE is a recent graduate of the University of Montana's MFA Program in Creative Writing. She lives in Missoula, Montana.

R.T. SMITH is the editor of *Shenandoah*. Louisiana State University Press published his *Trespasser*.

CHRISTINE GEBHARD lives in Andover, Massachusetts.

JAMES GURLEY lives in Seattle where he is associate editor of the on-line magazine *Salmon Bay Review*.

OLIVER RICE, a former program director for the Peace Corps, lives in Naples, Florida.

ROBERT WRIGLEY, who lives in Idaho, is currently a Guggenheim Fellow. His most recent book is *In the Bank of Beautiful Sins* (Penguin Books, 1995).

DERICK BURLESON is a graduate student in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Houston.

KEVIN CRAFT is a recent graduate of the University of Washington's MFA Program in Creative Writing. He lives in Seattle.

ALBERT GOLDBARTH lives in Wichita, Kansas. His most recent book is *Adventures in Ancient Egypt* (Ohio State University Press).

SHARON HASHIMOTO lives in Tukwila, Washington.

JAMES FINNEGAN lives in Hartford, Connecticut. He is a banking insurance underwriter.

RON SMITH, who won our Theodore Roethke Prize in 1989, lives in Richmond, Virginia. The University Presses of Florida published his *Running Again in Hollywood Cemetery* in 1988.

Poetry Northwest Prize Awards, 1997

MACLEOD-GROBE PRIZE: \$500

Oliver Rice for Two Poems (Spring 1996),
Four Poems (Summer 1996), Three Poems (Autumn 1996)
and Four Poems (Winter 1996-97)

BULLIS-KIZER PRIZE: \$200

Tina Kelley for Three Poems (Summer 1996)
and Four Poems (Winter 1996-97)

THEODORE ROETHKE PRIZE: \$200

Robert Wrigley for Three Poems (Autumn 1996)

RICHARD HUGO PRIZE: \$200

Bruce MacKinnon for Four Poems (Spring 1996)

