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# POETRY NORTHWEST

SUMMER 1997

## *Cathleen Calbert*

Three Poems

### BAD JUDGMENT

It's on the line, the sun's in your eyes,  
 and the time you thought it would be all right  
 to go for a drive all alone at night,  
 he didn't mean it, he'll never do it again,  
 you can trust him,  
 I think she's really a friend,  
 bags of jelly slipped under your skin,  
 I bet the child will be all right where he is,  
 it doesn't get dark until late,  
 I'll take the red eye, have the cheese steak,  
 you keep track of the receipts,  
 we'll only meet for coffee,  
 I'll weigh less in a couple weeks,  
 I'll take the job, I'll marry him,  
 I'll see my mother in the spring,  
 no hurry, I'm not even sleepy,  
 I can drive all night, don't worry,  
 how about chocolate martinis?  
 Is the water supposed to be green?  
 It's all right, I'm not ovulating,  
 it's all right, I'm clean,  
 it's all right, I haven't been with anyone else lately,  
 I think having a baby will bring us closer together,  
 I guess I can stand another cup of coffee,  
 let's get the puppy,  
 let's get the aquarium,

let's get another puppy,  
 I think that's as big as a dog like that gets,  
 he's just lonely,  
 why don't we not plan anything?  
 Aerosol cans, the Republican party,  
 the Christian right's a flash in the pan,  
 if the book's good, they'll publish it eventually,  
 why don't we just paint the whole thing,  
 we could knock down a wall,  
 we could dig up these trees,  
 I think I'll wait to have a baby,  
 I don't think these sores mean anything,  
 my doctor knows what's best for me,  
 my dentist knows what's best for me,  
 my therapist knows I'm trying,  
 I feel I'll never lose you, we'll keep writing,  
 you're sensitive, that's why you do these things,  
 I'll just watch a little TV,  
 I'll talk to him, but I won't say anything,  
 We'll talk, but we won't do anything,  
 if I tell him how I feel,  
 if he tells me how he feels,  
 I just want him to be honest with me,  
 I only want to know the truth,  
 not knowing hurts worse,  
 henna just makes your hair shiny,  
 it's too overcast to burn,  
 he's staying for the children,  
 they're not even sleeping together,  
 she doesn't understand him,  
 everybody parks here,  
 they never ticket,  
 they almost never tow,  
 there's an undertow  
 but you hardly feel it,  
 this will pinch a little,  
 this might smart,  
 you'll only feel a tug,  
 are you crazy, they love company!  
 She didn't mean anything, I don't think.

Why don't you go talk to her?  
 I bet the two of you can straighten it out.  
 If I were you, I'd leave him,  
 I'd perm my hair,  
 I'd get that outfit,  
 honesty is the best policy,  
 a relationship based on trust can weather anything,  
 I know you do,  
 I love you too.

#### DEAD DEBUTANTE

Blood sprayed down my yellow gown,  
 which happens to look great on me,  
 though it's pinned in the back  
  
 and the polish has me lacquered in,  
 I look thin, pale, dark-eyed, when I walk in,  
 pretty and scary, a faded girl  
  
 still waiting to come out in society.  
 They are his friends, but not really,  
 fellow intellectuals  
  
 who've refused to wear anything too silly,  
 only tokens of the evening:  
 an eye mask, funny hat, insect antennae,  
  
 though they are smiling benignly  
 and offering me a drink,  
 I'm a poet, people expect such things,  
  
 what's dramatic, overdone, and possibly damaging  
 to my respectability,  
 though everyone's generally friendly  
  
 except Lily B. Marie,  
 who leaves each room that I walk in,  
 as though I truly am the walking dead,

a zombie deb,

I think she thinks she's talking over my head,  
her hair is black and spiky,

her heels are black and spiky,  
she keeps leaning into him,  
offering something

to eat, drink, anything, everything,  
so I, long dead,  
place my icy hand on his,

pearly lips in that simple wifely grin,  
*he's mine, I'm with him.*  
Sweetly, he allows me

to encircle him.

"My dead wife," he says,  
and the party begins.

#### MY DEAD BOYFRIEND

I hoped nobody would notice anything  
as we toured *Gay Paris*,  
but I had no need to worry:  
our companions didn't know him well,  
couldn't compare this to that,  
the cool skin, stiff expressions,  
his left arm frozen around me.

People notice less than you think.

I was thankful for the time together  
before he'd start disintegrating.

Love may last, but life is fleeting.

I was grateful for the temporary  
re-animation of my sweetheart,  
though he was a little gray  
and didn't especially feel  
like visiting famous French cemeteries.

He liked clubbing, being close to me,

ordering drinks and dancing slowly.

When we made love, he was hard as a rock  
but couldn't come, so he satisfied me  
and left me feeling a little empty.

The last time he climbed on top of me,  
I felt a shudder, then the cold semen  
finally pumping, before he seized up  
permanently. On his way to the grave,

he'd wanted to give me something: a baby.

I appreciated his inhuman exertions  
and stroked his cold, clenched hands  
as he relaxed into the corpse he needed to be.

I could feel his seed inside of me,  
like tears of ice melting.

But what had he given me?

When your man is dead, can he really  
create something new and living?

Or would I give birth to a half-dead baby,  
whose cheeks stayed rosy  
though his eyes iced blue, lips rigid  
at my swollen, hungry breasts,

as I sang him songs  
of the spider and the rain and the sun,  
then tucked him in the ice box  
to keep him cozy, while I quietly cried  
myself to sleep, thinking somewhere  
other mothers are strolling in the park,  
not dreaming in the dark mid-morning,  
somewhere men don't need to be  
resurrected daily, babies laugh and breathe,  
and women aren't the only ones living.

ANAESTHESIA GREEN

At the forked vein's crossroad,  
The largest on the back of your hand,  
The doctor points his needle:  
*You'll feel a bee sting.*  
*Count backwards from a hundred.*  
You're going in.

To the sleep bath, the sulfur pail,  
The seed pod of the maple.  
So many skins and temperatures!  
By ninety-eight it still burns  
Like a van Gogh window,  
Steadfast, phosphorescent.

By ninety-three  
You are peeling back leaves  
In the darkened forest.  
You have cooled to lichen, almost  
Silver, outspread in the eaves of the bark  
Like small arthritic hands.

You comb through the ionic ferns,  
The mosses lying like animals.  
You drift, cooler still —  
The succulents: crassula,  
Sedum, sempervivum,  
Thick as limbs.

Somewhere in the low thirties  
(If you were still counting)  
You are back in childhood,  
Peering as you once did into the edges  
Of the antique mirror.  
Deep in the intestines of the glass

You spied a million tiny rooms,  
Cell after cell full of ether.  
The same shiver wakes you  
To this iron bed,  
At your lips the taste of tin.  
This is the coldest you have ever been.

OAK TREES ARE STANDING

Through the night and in the morning —  
The five oaks that line  
The old house burning  
By the quiet river.  
Fire lights the casement windows,  
An urge of wind against the panes,  
A ringing of glass on the terrace —  
Symphonic, unanimous.  
Everything we did in that old house  
(Words moving through air,  
Hands pushing shadows)  
Rises skyward with the light ash and cinder  
Like a flock of birds unloosed.  
Still, the trees persist —  
The highest boughs are slowly nodding —  
Even as the beams fold,  
And the blue slate falls,  
And the gulls bank, loss upon loss,  
On the great hill.

## Jeff Mock

### SELF-PORTRAIT WITH EVERYTHING STILL IN PLACE

It's a kind of luck, waking up with a head  
Attached to his shoulders. But whose head?  
Jeff Mock may easily be waking up  
Across town, attached to other shoulders,  
With fireflies for eyes, a buzzing hive  
For a mind, and whichever cat may have his tongue  
Does the world a favor. It wags  
Too much. Listen to it, and try  
To stop your ears! So the tom takes it  
Out of the city, crosscountry, pursued by a million  
Hungry midnight crooners, a stampeding  
Herd of fur and snarls, and now  
The city will sleep in sober peace.  
The absence of cats is a contract of quiet,  
A Deal, a steal, nothing for nothingness.  
That is a sacrifice Jeff Mock would make,  
For the good of Peoplekind. They're mostly worth it.  
But while some nights are superior  
And some quite simply sublime,  
The mirror confirms his hopes and fears:  
The Jeff Mock that stares into the mirror  
Is the Jeff Mock that stares back.  
And all his fingers and toes, each  
In order, are properly attached. That's commerce for you:  
He lives! No bargain is so good  
It will not be broken. Now Peoplekind  
Must suffer another night  
Of broken yowls, screeching love-  
Calls, and all that spitting and scratching  
In the bushes. Not to mention the cats, too.  
Jeff Mock is not sure  
Why he does it—a pint of courage,  
A pitcher of oblivion. The dull throb,  
That existential ache, is like the algospasm  
Of a hammer dropped on the big toe  
Of his heart. Life is pain, the dread

Pirate says, anyone who tells you  
Otherwise is trying to sell you something.  
And that's the barmaid's hoax, and true  
To the last drop: every swig  
And swallow fills the hollow, aye.  
Cheers, sir, stranger and friend,  
If you'll drink to me, I'll drink to you. Numb  
Numb numb numb. Oh,  
For a muse of firewater. Numb. There are  
Other means, but none so easy  
And senseless. Come morning, the mirror  
Assesses the credits and debits. Argh.  
Jeff Mock sticks out his tongue  
And there, in miniature, the Chinese army  
Tramps in muddy boots across it to the cliff.

## Erin Brooks

### WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT YOU GET

Look for pokeweed, burrs, dried-up towns tumbling by  
under a sky bright and closed as a tin shed. On the roadside,  
blown tires and a dumped truck, axles propped on concrete blocks:  
somebody's worn-out life. Think flat. Highways don't end  
and when they do, they open to fields spreading like bedsheets,  
bleaching in the sun, toppled barns—which want to be fields—  
showing vacant hearts to everyone. Hills are liars, the way they  
pocket things, then hold their hands out: who me? They act like  
they're not lonely or on fire. Twice a day the sun burns the world  
to the ground, East, then West. The sky blazes and all who learned  
to want nothing and to be happy on less than that, turn gold.

**Wesley McNair**

THE MATCH

It is not clear why  
she ever got into the ring  
in the first place, ding-toed, all hips,  
swinging like a girl. But it is she  
who lands the first punch, right  
on his proud chin. Nobody hits me there,  
his whole body seems to say,  
and he whirs his gloves under her nose  
in such a way she understands  
he is offering the chin  
and pops him again. By the middle rounds  
when the blood breaks out on his head  
and it is certain he never intended  
to hit her, she just stands  
with her gloves down  
waiting for him to come to her.  
Who will stop the fight is the question  
their children, having watched  
from the front row for as long  
as they can remember, never ask,  
knowing it will only continue,  
knowing there is no life outside the fight,  
which they take with them  
when they leave, on their way  
into the lives of others. Alone at last  
in the late rounds, the old boxers  
clinch, embracing each other for the first  
time in years. They are smiling,  
he sure she can't hit him  
as long as he holds her like this,  
she knowing he is in her control forever  
and ever, their kind of love.

**Douglas Nordfors**

LULLABY

You cover your head with the sheet  
and make a sound like a monster. I'm your mother—  
I realize your lashes protect your eyes.  
Take the sheet away from your face now.  
Breathe easy. You can't scare me.  
I will sit here, my waist touching your leg,  
until you can't hear my whispering.  
You will wake up with my hands  
in yours, though I will be downstairs  
with the sun, making breakfast.  
When you were very little you asked me why  
the kitchen is the only room in our house  
that has sunlight. I asked you why  
you didn't ask the sun. I don't remember  
how you answered. You probably laughed.  
Laughter comes easily to you. You see, our life together  
is a bedtime story. You climb the pine tree  
out back and put your question to the sun.  
It opens its small mouth. It has no teeth.  
I could swear the moon has holes in it,  
like swiss cheese... you remember that story...  
the little mouse wants to eat the moon.  
I'm so ignorant. I mean, I know nothing.  
Tell me what the sun said, tell me  
as you close your eyes and the dark unfolds,  
revealing the sleepless, the deprived...  
forgive me, I'm using my own language,  
believing you understand me. Don't worry,  
I'm not lonely. You're so young I'm still  
giving birth to you. The moonlight will flood your room  
when I'm not looking. I'll just happen  
to wake up before you, and your presence  
will comfort me even before you run down the stairs  
and come into the kitchen. Go to sleep now.  
The four walls close and open like a hand.  
The window is like an hourglass. There are stories

that can't explain these things. I tell them to myself  
every day. Go to sleep now.  
No matter how hard I close my eyes  
I can't sleep. Something separates us. That's our nature.  
And you accept me, I'm sure of it.  
Balancing on two legs, I enter your dreams  
and all night you will not wake for fear of losing me.

### *Jeff Worley*

### Three Poems

#### THE BIRD BEHIND OUR LIVING ROOM WALL

At first a rapid wingbeat  
behind the Klee watercolor titled  
"Landscape with Yellow Birds,"  
as if one of them were trying to break  
out and fly into the astonished room.  
A fluttering heart murmur,  
a pulse skipping like a flat stone.  
And my wife and I find ourselves  
slipping bookmarks into our important  
lives, as confused as our tomcat Jaws,  
suddenly alert and on watch.  
What to do? Outside, no chink  
in the shortstone facing,  
no eroded eave, no break  
for even the smallest finch  
or starling. But the next day the mad  
wings again, the urgent knocking.  
And I find myself on hands and knees  
with a flashlight in the crawlspace  
under the house: Mason jars,  
the hanging husks of spiders,  
a bottle of Nehi grape, unopened.  
Cobwebs brush my face. But finally I find  
nothing—no way the foundation  
could have conspired in this.

Then, back in the house, I hear the strong  
peeping grow smaller, an attenuate echo ....  
When does fear resolve itself to blind hope,  
hope to an impossibly wedged hunger  
nodding out of the world?

A week later

I think I hear a final flutter,  
some paroxysm of closure. But it's  
only the season's first fat flakes of snow  
brushing the window, our cat yawning  
into winter. In the fireplace, flames  
begin making their way through wood.

#### ON MY WAY TO THE COMPOST BIN

I stop to inspect the garden,  
which has risen from nothing

but dark seed. Dusk is falling,  
its silken strands holding me

here. I hear the wingbeat  
at my neck before I feel it,

the ragged shape that swoops me  
and settles on the garage roof.

I wait for a melodic hoot  
from this huge feather duster,

but all I get is a scowl  
and three loud clacks.

I've never seen an owl in the city,  
his talons sinking into the tiles,

eyes like thick slices of pineapple.  
He simply sits there, this distant-

distant cousin of appetite and  
breath, purposefully out of reach.

And as suddenly as I know  
the plump eggplant shining below me

will give up all of its secrets  
tomorrow on the dinner table

(with provolone and nicely spiced),  
I realize that this is as close

as I'm ever likely to come to unriddling  
even the smallest mystery: the owl

gulping a moth, preening, explaining  
nothing, inexplicably there.

#### ARACHNID

"...she lets out a fine  
And delicate yet tough and tensile line..."  
—Thom Gunn, "Arachne"

The rain has lifted,  
and I've been watching  
a furrow spider weave her spell  
near the back porch light.  
It's a Kentucky summer night.  
I sit with a fresh mystery  
novel on my lap, feeling  
the freshness outside draw  
two somnambulant mosquitoes  
and a carnival of moths who begin  
to reconnoiter the 30-watt bulb.  
God, this weaver's good!  
The loom of her body gives itself  
over to pure artistry, the web—  
innocent as a doily—taking shape.  
Her geometry proves itself  
as she reinvents the wheel-like trap,

drawing a crowd now:  
whitefly, mealybugs, a spotted  
cucumber beetle out on the town  
after work. She's furious to finish,  
her spinnerettes oozing as fast  
as they can the viscid fluid  
that hardens into threads.  
I'm exhausted by this watching.  
I know I could flick off the light,  
a simple human motion, and put her  
out of business. But I'd rather  
remain her silent partner  
in crime, watch her trap this aphid,  
strawberry juice from my garden  
smearing its face. And here's  
one of the Lacebug Mob who've  
riddled my azalea leaves, folded  
them into withered umbrellas.  
I wish I'd screwed in a brighter  
bulb if that's all the invitation  
they need...

And I think how lucky  
I am to have my limbs intact,  
a heartbeat steady as a Black Forest clock.  
I click the lock goodnight, let the light  
blaze: *I'm here, welcome, welcome.*

**Robert Hill Long**

THE ODYSSEY, BOOK ELEVEN

In the afterlife, the war heroes are easy  
to spot: their arms end in pincers now  
and they tend to crouch, shielding their faces.

It is the famous old meadow of rewards.  
Endless pillowing of white asters. Somewhere a pan-pipe.  
The sky a close, unfocussed shimmer, like a snug harbor

seen from its sunlit shallows. Once they flew  
Avengers and Phantoms. They stood with flamethrowers  
before a hardened, stuttering mouth to the underworld

and silenced it. In the moment of letdown  
after the great, the selfless act, it is possible  
to imagine them imagining themselves centaurs

or winged victories. But here a shadow glides  
across the sun and they scuttle sideways. The eyes  
have slid to the top of their heads, they lie

unblinking on stems short as asters, and face  
a blue vanishing that looks like heaven heights  
but is heavy depths: there they react to the plunge

and clack of iron tongs, to cages enclosing  
dead little heads, lowered on rope yellow  
as a sun ray in a child's book. Their pincers,

like their flattened skulls, are blue to say *No one  
knew this would be the bottom of the sky.* They do  
a dance of aversion, as though with castanets

crossed over their heads, among star-colored  
flowers they cannot pluck or eat. In the brief  
blue waterless weight of an afterlife

which even the least skeptical doctors call *sleep.*

**Anne Reynolds Voegtlen**

DRIVEBY

She walks with hardly a tremor,  
almost steady in black sweater, pink pants, flowered shirt.  
Her car has snubbed the jersey barrier,  
a crushed snout mounting concrete,  
a windshield newly beautiful with cracked light  
and intricate jags. Our headlights  
play over steam and bent metal, and her  
sliding down to her knees. My mind wants it  
both ways, the face smiling, hair billowed out all right,  
open mouth speaking nothing not right, not sticky  
with brilliant red glaze, not a gleaming  
red clownface. Not now. We're going home  
from a dinner party. We've had  
a couple drinks at least. Not ready.  
We've been accomplished in our jobs. Not able.  
We have insufficient training. Let us next time.  
Someone must be on the way. Let us later.  
At the last minute, I ask you to stop. You don't.  
From the slightest rise of moral ground,  
I turn on you. We go at it, trying to fix  
some relative blame, trying to draw some line  
to cover us. We can't admit the simple thing—  
*whichever* had the wheel would not have stopped.  
And this rides home unspoken in the dark between us,  
a bloated, lolling thing let into the car  
with who we thought we were. It is close to us,  
leering, its green breath ripe with mash and juniper.  
She stays with us, too—legs buckled, face  
afame with its own blood, a blood that burns  
and burns and will not burn away.

**Matt Yurdana**

MY DAYS WITH EARL KESSLER

I believe the rumors, flaring, then dying,  
week after week, like matches  
held up to Earl Kessler  
as we pack frozen salmon in the cold room  
at Phoenix Seafoods.

Earl wears a thick purple sock  
on the stump that is his left arm,  
a small pendulum we measure the day by.  
The rest he lost

without anesthetics, only boot laces  
and a machete on the border  
of northern Laos,

or a few wrong inches  
after 12 hours with a hay baler  
on a farm in Nevada,

or the time he gouged a man's eyes  
with that single crooked thumb,

or the one I almost believe,  
that he was mauled  
by three Dobermans and a pit bull  
on his mother's 35th birthday,  
stumbling into the house, holding  
what was left of his elbow  
as she was blowing out the candles.

There are moments before  
the morning shift, when Earl and the rest of us  
might talk, but instead we sit

on the hulls of overturned skiffs,  
drinking coffee, watching the net menders  
spooling mounds of herring web,

and no horizon beyond the docks,  
no imprint in the fog dividing  
sky from water, rows of boats  
adrift on the air.

By 10 am a line will appear,  
a seam joining two fields of gray, gulls  
balanced near the curve of the earth,

and by 2 pm the islands, the bow pickers  
with their own outlines,  
like a foothold, like a moth resting  
on the whiteness of a ceiling.

At 7 pm I emerge, numb and blinking,  
from the smell of fish  
I have long since stopped smelling,

the boats sitting their own reflections  
in the last light of day.

And I will walk the half mile upstream  
through bogs and willow thickets,  
to a small meadow where I've heard

Earl sometimes sits,  
shirtless in the weakening light,  
straddling a dead log,  
his head, shoulders, and ruined arm  
covered with bread crumbs,

and a flock of chickadees  
falling and rising from his body.

NEW MATH

This is long division. This is not happily ever  
after. Together comes apart to get her

the kitchen table, bath towels, not-so-easy chair.  
(He takes the sofa, bookshelf, toaster,

and the name.) He'll be forever  
bodied for her in the mingled scents of after

shave and morning coffee made before  
the thrash of back to bed. She tries to sever

certain ties, pants, shirts from the core  
of corollaries: the recumbent his and hers. Where

his clothes once hung, a cipher  
fills the closet that they share –

no, that conclusion's incorrect, she for-  
gets to carry 'd' – the word, after

all is said and done, is *shared*. One letter  
difference and difference is what's left: matter

that refuses to agree, the prime denominator  
of the fractile fairy tale – one divided into one and not a pair.

THE HUMAN BODY

is two-thirds water, one-third  
hydroelectric dam – with a lady in a barrel going over the falls.

The body is equal quarters  
Okefenokee, albino catfish, cayman smile, ball  
python coiled in the sink. A cypress takes root in the colon.

Today I am one-eighth  
out of breath, three-fifths enlarged heart, finished  
in medulla oblongata. Yesterday I was all guts.

You are part Gulf Stream, part Mississippi muck. Oyster bed. Rake.

The body is silica. It burns – it is briefly  
Lalique.

Your late-night body is mixed signals and static, Muddy  
Waters, magnetic bliss.

My body is half  
Wakatomika River, half white iris, half  
black-hand sandstone – it doesn't add up.

Your body names me in Braille. I tattoo your divides  
with my tongue. You wrap me in your mother's  
number-two-soul-fuck towels, you carry me  
to shore, I carry you away, but our bodies remain

the last stop on the West Virginia turnpike  
where the water fountain works but smells of pulp,  
slag, silt. Tissue-thin, the body is our toll, our penny

souvenir. It is the map we can't re-fold. A sign says: You  
are here. Our lips dry in the Santa Ana wind.

INTO AMERICA

If there is a rumor  
of a new hole in a fence,  
one that is safer  
to pass through,  
the families will gather  
and wait until  
the darkness offers cover.

My father  
has told me of a man  
who was beaten with a hammer  
when he was caught, until his leg cracked,  
until his femur  
was in pieces. Now, that man's leg  
is bolted together.

My mother  
knows a girl  
who was left to wander  
on the *frontera*,  
when her parents were  
caught without her. Now,  
she is our neighbor.

When it is late,  
when there is, maybe, an hour  
until daylight, those who have waited,  
out of fear  
or out of patience,  
will have to decide if it is better  
to cross, or if it is better, somehow,  
to live with desire.

BENT TO THE EARTH

They had hit Ruben  
with the high beams, had blinded  
him so that the van  
he was driving, full of Mexicans  
going to pick tomatoes,  
would have to stop. Ruben spun

the van into an irrigation ditch,  
spun the five-year-old me awake  
to immigration officers,  
their batons already out,  
already looking for the soft spots on the body,  
to my mother being handcuffed  
and dragged to a van, to my father  
trying to show them our green cards.

They let us go. But Alvaro  
was going back.  
So was his brother Fernando.  
So was their sister Sonia. Their mother  
did not escape,  
and so was going back. Their father  
was somewhere in the field,  
and was free. There were no great truths

revealed to me then. No wisdom  
given to me by anyone. I was a child  
who had seen what a piece of polished wood  
could do to a face, who had seen his father  
about to lose the one he loved, who had lost  
some friends that would never return,  
who, later that morning, bent  
to the earth and went to work.

**Steve Langan**

DINNER POEM

The scariest part of any feast is dessert.  
You see your twisted reflection in the tray.  
The whole time my legs under the tablecloth  
have been crooked and cocked.  
He is telling a story about Yakima,  
about the railroad, about a certain streetcar  
he engineered down the parade route.  
The many legs of the women arrive.  
They must have faces.  
I have spent most of my life looking down.  
I found a dime once, but when I didn't  
stoop and pick it up I had to hear  
a story of the Great Depression, etc.  
The dialogue hammers. It makes you  
feel dumb inside. You are still, you focus,  
*om*, you are centered and certainly privileged,  
even as somewhere some man staggers  
who used to wear your coat,  
size forty-two long, gray, two buttons,  
the one you wear to every dinner.  
The one he sells to a careful stranger.

**Cathy Eisenhower**

Three Poems

JANE PAINTS A SELF-PORTRAIT

Green for the hand, thin as a fern  
Green for the swift river of the thigh  
Green for the toenail, the hairshaft, the death sprouting

White for the soap-naked throat  
White for the mushroom heart  
White for the tongue, a snail searching for blood

Black for intestines like ditches  
Black for the stem of the brain, the xylem and phloem  
Black for the cheek, for the bruise

Blue for the tooth like a bird lung  
Blue for the single eye facing us  
Blue for the mucus that coaxes the sinus

Red for the liver wet with poison  
Red for the curtain, half-open  
Red for the plush areoles that rise and rise

THE SHAME OF JANE

She kept it for quite a while. How she  
polished her saddle shoes every Sunday  
afternoon. How she jumped & yelled &  
giggled & cooed & didn't smoke her first  
cigarette until 19. She was a cheerleader.  
She wore a uniform the colors of confetti.  
She was made of paper.

Her parents patted her head and eyed each  
other over their coffee cups. She had a high  
ponytail that flapped patriotically when she  
walked. She was a cheerleader. She has  
only uttered this black secret to a few,

usually through the smoke and heavy bass of a crowded bar. She was a cheerleader. She sucks in nicotine until her face hollows itself. She whispers this.

If you have never roared from a circle of human light into the universe. If you've never stood in cinder on your hands. Never sewn a carpet-heavy letter to your chest, listen.

She is ashamed of her past, like most of us. After school in our perky skirts, painting banners *Bury the Bulldogs Slaughter the Spartans*. The cold linoleum on our thighs to remind us at once of God and Jimmy Hummer, whose fat tongue half of us had blindly found.

The cheerleader belongs to a sad race. She fears the worst, so rather than face that fear which is most often in the form of large, growling man, she leaps into the air as if to see over the edge of the horizon, as if to escape the charred track she has both chosen and been forced to by her fear, as if the swarm of males fenced in behind her were battling in her own head and leaping were the inevitable effect. She can vouch for this. She was a cheerleader.

And every week the chrysanthemum smelled like dying. It drooped from her sweater, it pointed its soft fingers toward something inside her which was twisting arthritically. She threw it into the crowd once, saw a face she thought was Jimmy Hummer's chin-deep in that red odor. She took his fragrance in her mouth that night as she would take the acrid smells of other men into her, and she would wish them well.

## JANE THOUGHT IT MYSTERIOUS

One birthday his father  
sent him a bread machine—  
the white box, the switches,  
no mixing, no punching down  
air bubbles, no kneading  
the dough to elasticity. He  
would open the hatch, add  
the measured ingredients:  
salt and yeast, flour and eggs,  
click the lid, flip the switch,  
the red dot glowing like  
an eye in a photograph.  
He would in time climb  
on and enter her with  
some difficulty. Jane watched  
his face distort  
shadows the lamp cast  
about them like nets.  
Jane watched him wait  
the few hours:  
lick his finger, turn  
the page, follow it down  
the box scores. Jane heard  
the white box hum. Her cheek  
to the plastic lid, she felt it  
vibrate heat. She was  
anxious to break the perfect  
crust with her teeth.

DOLL SUITCASE

Here, the little empire of Barbie remains, rectangular, snug, safe, with a white plastic handle and tiny lock before lovers or husbands opened it into rapturous disorder.

This was longing, girlish, doe-like, for forget-me-nots and trellises, a satin gown in icy blue, bell-skirted with shoes dyed to match, a first kiss wreathed in significance, at dusk among gazebo dahlias.

Our desire, quiet and cool, hung there on plastic hangers like the tiny clothes, puffed, frilled, perpetually adrift. The red-plunge neckline dress floated. A stiff tulle skirt flared from its bodice, dotted with tiny red hearts that interrupted a chaste white sea of skirt.

Hearts as red as the boy's flushed face, red as the bricks my shoulders would scratch against as he pushed me fiercely against it, staining the satin, crushing the fresh corsage of spring prom, fumbling words of love into my shoulder, uttered in hoarse sobs, we gave away, took back, and gave.

AN AFTERNOON IN THE WORLD

I remember how the nuns spit it out, hissing—the word “secular,” as Rosie and I slithered past school down the hill to the shopping mall and gorged ourselves on candy, hot chocolates, forbidden movies among blazing marquees, soft-lit, carpeted boutiques.

Escaping evening rosary again, we descended to North Hills Shopping Center to rise on long, shining escalators into a paradise of crystal jewelry, chinoiserie and perfume atomizers. After days of the words “discipline” and “spiritual,” after the dry prayers at breakfast, at lunch, choir practice, piano practice,

forced study hall, hours in chapel at Angelus, Vespers, through squadrons of clerks we hurried, into mountains of stacked dry goods, draping paisley shawls and strings of pearls over our dull gray uniforms, dabbing Crepe de Chine, Shalimar, Orange Musk onto our wrists, slipping into sling-backed leather pumps with stiletto heels, pulling long silky nylons and garters up over our secretly shaved legs.

Where are you now, Rosie, and where are those fuzzy sweaters,

electroplated rings, that orange  
yarn we bought and spooled  
around our boyfriends' class rings  
before we hung them  
from our necks, that bright pink  
polish we slathered over them  
in a sticky heap, and the  
lipstick with silver flecks that  
tasted of rainwater? Where  
are those tortoiseshell compacts of blush,  
the mascara wands? As if a wand  
and a sweater could turn us  
into models and not  
those gray-blazered schoolgirls

in oxford shoes and high socks  
running back up the road  
with our paper sacks of merchandise,  
running hard, having stayed  
too long, running so as not to  
miss supper, and holding  
that taste of the secular  
beneath our tongues  
like those bright-colored  
candy rings we favored,  
lemon, watermelon, lime  
and cherry, those lifesavers.

## *Katrina Vandenberg*

Two Poems

### ANATOMY LESSON #2: THE PALPATION OF BONY LANDMARKS

To color them in on a skeleton chart  
is nothing like pinpointing them on your body  
so we sit face to face in the art of finding:  
zygoma is nothing but the curve of your cheek,  
and next are both your clavicles, collaring  
your neck. They meet at a hook, the sternal notch,

at the edge of all that's fragile—a little box  
that holds your voice, your throat delivering  
each breath. Too much to think about just now;  
I'd rather think of how your bones protect.  
The plate of your breast is smooth and firm,  
a locked door to the ribbed cage keeping safe  
your heart forever from stars of steel and glass.

This is true to a point, the point where bones end:  
because I should, I'll follow your sternum down  
to the xiphoid process, then beyond to what  
is vulnerable. Not much protects your liver  
or your spleen. Meanwhile, here we are,

in the place that bones meet skin, and what  
a miracle you are, my love, to be a landscape  
I have somehow lived with and never seen  
until now. First and still and always  
it is beautiful, a difficult gift,  
to let me touch and know the architecture  
holding you upright beneath your surface—  
the churchyard's bones, the edges of your skull.

## THE GREEN RIVERS OVER OUR FACES

Whatever they say, me and my sister know  
Mother is alive. We have whispered the truths  
of where she lives each night, when we knot  
together in Mother's double bed. Before Daddy yells  
from his new room to *get some sleep in there*,  
Irene has told her favorite, that Mother combs  
the fog with rubied hands, helping the ghost  
freighters part the Great Lakes. I like better

the one that places her out on the islands  
that are near ours but were never settled.  
There, she snaps fires to life from wet sand  
and seaweed, to tell all the planes she must fly,  
her girls wait, not sleeping on the lighted coastline.  
I see her parachuting to our roof one night,  
jewel-slipped, magical, everything the same.  
But I worry she's still out there on our own shore,

looking for her shoes, and she won't come home  
until she finds them. We have her shoes.  
A strange man found them on a dock's edge, neat  
and jeweled and left to right. Daddy took  
the slippers, said no when the police said  
suicide. I gave Irene the left one;  
we've slept with them all winter. As a pair,  
we make them tramp and echo on the stairs.

Even in April, when they find her body  
blue and current-trapped beneath a boathouse,  
my sister and I neatly shelve her shoes away,  
left to right in her closet, as Mother likes.  
And still, we wait. Because some nights she rises  
barefoot from November's water and our  
basement's depths, her hair streaming green rivers  
over our faces until we wake up.

She says gaily she slept such a long time  
in the cattails, the coldest police-dog nose  
could not wake her. In the best of these nights,

she then opens her closet and thanks us for shoes  
that are whole and unfilled. But mostly  
we make the mistake of telling her how everyone  
says that she drowned, and my mother falls apart  
in my arms, hugging me to her bones until it hurts.

## *Michael Magee*

### SENTENCES

One should have, if possible, at least  
four (egg, marble, me, bug) *things*  
in each sentence.

Emerson succeeded in 1826 when he  
wrote, from St. Augustine, FL, *I stroll  
on the sea beach and drive a green orange  
over the sand with a stick.*

Here there is no sea or sand, though oranges  
can be bought at the Food Mart over there  
for a reasonable price, and here's an umbrella  
which can serve as a stick.

In the laundrymat the dryers drive underwear  
and socks in circles.

A Greek woman blows smoke through  
ninety degree heat at two lumbering dogs.

Cars, cars, cars, cars.

Vince looks up from the paper, scratches  
his knee and says, "Me and my big mouth."

If I gave him *egg* and *bug* to go with him  
and that mouth, we'd have something going.

SEASON OF LEVITATION

My mother's looking for the last  
leaf touched by rain so high  
if she falls from the oak  
my father cannot catch her  
the moon will be too late  
with its grasp but she wants  
to hold her cheek to the most  
green the softest green  
the world owns the sun  
caresses because the dishes  
are high in the sink  
like mountains pushing up  
and the grandchildren already  
have children and soon  
the last chance to get lost  
in the trees will be the wish  
she makes inside  
her final breath so now  
is the time to climb  
with hands and feet now  
is the hour to let neighbors  
call police there is a leaf one  
leaf a last leaf the rain  
has touched one drop waiting  
hanging just to fall into her mouth  
to reach everything old  
inside that's curled inside  
like the most  
secretive root a leaf  
waits at the top bends  
at the top from the weight  
the small weight of one  
drop of one  
world of one last chance  
to adore beyond reason

VIGIL IN A WHEELCHAIR

*How dark it will be when...death comes and sunders  
the siblings that once were joined, body and soul.*

—"The Soul's Address," Exeter Book

Four clocks with four times. Six exit signs. A mirrored ball  
at the intersection of Cardiology and the Difficult Airway

Clinic. White walls and white doors, a white floor kept clean  
by two women pushing whirling machines. The building hums,

the building breathes. I'm in a *Vista* by Everest & Jennings  
that pulls to the left. Soon I forget my legs, soon

I believe my whole life's been spent on a roll. I mean  
no offense. It's better to wait in motion, to fight worry

with work of any kind, better to panic popping wheelies  
or smashing into chairs. Somewhere inside, beyond

the electric doors I pass and pass, on a gurney surrounded  
by masked women & men, she's losing three and four a.m.,

five's pruned from her life, a premonition, a practice death.  
That's a word they don't say, don't allow on their forms.

*Complications may result. Infection is possible. We cannot  
be held responsible.* I alone wait, I alone am not soothed

by the tranquilizing vagueness of *Vapor Drawing*, a print  
in reticent greens and courteous blues. The curved clocks,

the slurred exit signs trapped in the mirrored ball  
suggest Escher was right, all things flow into themselves,

refusing to be lost. An empty elevator mumbles to a stop,  
a ritual mouth hanging open. Hours to imagine

*the dagger's point and dextral hand*, her skin's broken  
covenant, a scalpel's slip or discovery of unforeseen

pathology, a cancer devouring hidden flesh. At six,  
the surgeon appears, offers soft words that lift me

from the chair, words which are the shapes of breath,  
breath that gives the decades back. People begin

flowing in, lunches in hand, sleep still strong on slow  
faces. Some stare at me, an obvious mess, as if I am

the soul of danger. How do you nod at someone in a way  
that says *I'm simply obsessed* or convey with the telepathy

of a glance how violently we must sometimes pray,  
the life so short, the craft of love so long to learn.

#### WHAT I OWE

*for Eve*

For love seven cups of rain gathered  
from Da Vinci's sky for trust

the last Oreo the first comet  
I find for faith a dress

from the eyes of Monet blind  
on your body an animal

made of light for hope  
the formulas for the rust-trees

of fall and the dust  
of God's Latin on the back-side

of the moon where the weevil  
and rose and Bay of Dews

are named but nothing  
predicts you.

#### *Colleen Dunne*

#### THE CEILING

In the corner where the molding leaves a crack  
there are gnats settling in or straying  
toward the light fixture, repository

of moth wings, and it becomes  
winter this way, a count of quarter hours.  
I sleep well and take time

to examine the architecture, the minuscule  
wings and buttresses I wait  
for cold to kill. The wind chimes over my bed

measure a similar tendency  
toward unaffectedness.  
(I almost forget that the metal tubes

ring.) But when the couple downstairs  
fights or makes loud  
love, I find myself wanting to kill a gnat or open

a window for it. I reach to the chimes,  
like a baby, and bat them.

**Jim Peterson**

SOMEONE'S FATHER

on a business trip to a city  
not so different from my own  
I discovered a child  
she was laughing and running  
along the paths under an old bridge  
in the late afternoon shadows  
I stood among her footprints and she found me  
grabbing at my empty hand  
as if I could be someone's father  
who knew where the painted egg lay in high grass  
who spoke in secret whispers that brought  
the dog forth from under the porch  
who created with a wave of his hand  
the empty day  
I was just tired  
just looking for a grassy bank to lie down  
but she had me now this small wild person  
leading me by the hand in wavy circles  
to a clump of weeds to a big rock  
to a place where wind moved grains of sand  
she made me get down on my knees  
and wait till I saw it for myself  
and she was singing little bits of songs  
in her careless voice  
a bird addressing its own shadow in the leaves  
leaning all forty of her pounds  
to lug me along to a crack in the sidewalk  
where tiny ants traveled safe and unseen  
to a garbage can where drunken bees  
lay curled up in the sun  
see she said they are sleeping  
to the corner of a house where water dripped  
from the roof and made a bright green patch  
to a front door swung wide open  
and three empty rooms smelling of Lysol  
clean rooms the light shining on floors

the windows open and a breeze blowing through  
and this little girl running back and forth  
in the straightest line she knew  
with both hands raised  
helping the air to find its way across

**Vicki Angel**

THIS POEM WILL NEVER BE PUBLISHED

because my husband would never understand  
the way I ogle the new next-door neighbor, the God,  
who has just removed his turquoise tie-dyed t-shirt  
as he chops down the ailing fir in his new back yard.

He's six foot something, his skin stretched taut.  
His chest's an open highway, smooth and bald  
save the few hairs below his belly  
that disappear like a prayer into his tight gray sweats.

No, my husband wouldn't understand the way  
I pace the kitchen window gawking from my cell  
at the glinting ax as it lifts and falls,  
lifts and falls into the stubborn stump.

He wouldn't understand it's not a man I'm desiring,  
but the way the tulips stand erect, hard and close-petalled,  
brimming, in the corner of the yard,  
and how our sons, nearly grown now,

nudge and butt like untamed horses  
on the hot tar floor of the basketball court  
and how from this pastel middle-age we can still feel  
the way the red world oozes like a freshly-cut  
ripe plum. How the damp earth glistens, how it throbs.

MY MOTHER FISHED FOR CARP

Off she'd go at first light,  
hooks, rod, dough bait wrapped in waxed paper,  
walking five miles to the murky pond,  
casting, sitting still for hours  
for what sucked and burrowed  
along the bottom, those thick-bodied fish  
with hard-ringed mouths,  
scales big as nickels,  
sides red-slashed, bubbles rising  
in their wake, smell of swamp gas,  
and then suddenly the bobber moving,  
pulled under, my mother feeding out line,  
then striking up and back,  
a big fish that she carried back to us,  
reading our fortunes  
in its blood and syrups and coils,  
telling us we would marry,  
live in small houses  
with children, cats and dogs,  
that we would have troubles all our own,  
each of us touching the fish before it was wrapped  
in tin foil and baked all afternoon,  
that fish with many bones,  
that she said grace over, that tasted of mud.

THE RABBIT SCARE

After he'd put his tomatoes in,  
and a row or two of beans,  
he'd point a broomstick at each end  
and stretch between them a length of clothesline,  
hanging from it empty bottles and tin cans,  
showing us how they'd click  
and rattle when bumped against each other.  
But at night, with the wind

down off the mountain, it was different.  
Then it was a moaning  
that kept us under the covers.  
*Just the ghost of some old miner, he'd say,  
up and about in the dark,  
poor soul, after my tomatoes.*  
It was years later I blew across the mouth  
of a half-empty soda bottle  
and remembered waking in the dark,  
getting up nerve to slip to the window,  
making sure to be quiet,  
not wanting to scare off anything  
that was even for a little while  
at rest in my father's garden.

THE MOCK ORANGE

On his fifty-ninth birthday,  
my brother calls to say he'd just sunk  
twenty foul shots in a row,  
the old way, underhanded,  
and not one touching the rim,  
that silken swish.  
It was the old groove, he said,  
rolling the ball between his fingers,  
not even feeling his feet against the boards.  
Twenty in a row, he says again,  
and then nothing else,  
not whether he'd gone for a beer,  
or thought of our mother's mock orange bush,  
its heavy sweet scent all through June,  
those big white blossoms  
we'd collect after they'd dropped,  
putting them into our pockets,  
thinking they'd become real oranges,  
watching them brown and curl like dead spiders.  
In the silence I want to tell him  
I'd found one in the woods,  
and carried a few shoots back to my house,

wondering why I did not say it,  
trying to remember, after we hang up,  
what it means to hit the world  
twenty times in a row dead center.

**Tina Kelley**

Three Poems

ALL THE BIRDS ALOFT JUST NOW

They power a crucial momentum,  
keep human hearts high:

the starlings strobe-fluttering,  
earnest ducks, their panting a sweet whistle,

juncos whose striped tails expand and contract  
like a heart or any other thriving organ,

chickadees with that slight motion of a good kiss,  
compliant, as in pronouncing the Y in Yes,

sandpipers like shining wind in new leaves,  
unseen pipits darting at the height from which rain falls,

pileated woodpeckers flying with the gentle rhythm  
of wires floating down and up between phone poles,

the owls cutting through the beam of the lighthouse,  
those dark secrets, like wearing black underwear to work,

crows gargling their Ks, then soaring down with the speed  
of a spirit as it would travel the earth, the speed of wheeling

down a long, shaded hill, landing and hopping  
like little men recently appointed to the planning board,

the unidentified woodsbird, startled, evaporating  
like my dream as the alarm rings, the dream I am glad

to see flushed—that I ran over a swallow. Now it lives.  
If more birds were aloft just now,

the constrained steps of dreaming dogs  
would suddenly widen free.

And if each bird on each continent suddenly alighted,  
would clouds lower, trees wilt,

would we still hear that descant within?  
Would we still inhale?

ON THE QUESTION OF REVISING SPEED LIMITS

What would we think of the shape of trees  
if trees happened fast? If you could see  
that limb take that turn, tossing in a wind  
of growing, then staying when it was done?

What if you had to make space for them,  
avoid the dangers of that spot where a tree  
was due to grow? There would be another word for *grow*,  
a cross between *birth* and *eruption*. And for that spot.

You couldn't camp or build a house there.  
Warning. Imminent tree. No stopping or standing.

What if waves grew as slowly as trees?  
You could learn to climb a wave. You could build a wave house.  
Someone would have clearcut the Atlantic by now.  
The joy in watching the ocean would ebb,

then flow, as people started looking at it like  
the Grand Canyon or Taj Mahal.

What if heat waves were fast, if  
temperatures rose and fell in an instant,  
if snow fell all at once and buried us?  
Would we come to love the strange sudden change,

like putting your fingers on the wrong keys  
and typing yuomh ;olr yjod/?

And what if your pace changed, forever,  
and you were locked into gliding, canoe speed,  
the scenery inexorable, inevitable,  
coming at you in undeniable motion.

Would it be your heaven or hell  
never to rush or slow down,  
to travel forever looking at river banks,  
only all the river banks, at that pace?

#### INSTRUCTIONS FROM THE CHOIR DIRECTOR

*The voice isn't an instrument that has buttons or keys to press,  
but you can control it with images. If you raise your hand  
at the end of a note, that in itself keeps the note from going flat.*

—composer and director Fred West

We start together by inhaling together, then picturing, quickly,  
how cherry trees hold their petals suspended above the ground.

And we start together, aiming together, six ball in the corner pocket,  
using the cue of his agile downbeat.

When we sing slowly we are asked to think of the spread of mosses  
and liverworts  
over the rocks from lakes and streams, up the hills, andante across  
the continents.

When we sing sforzando, we imagine a sun so bright and sudden  
it makes ours cast a shadow.

We learn deep breaths for the long whole notes,  
and lie back and think of England.

For pianissimo, he tells us of his beloved,  
who breathes so quietly at night you can't hear her.

During the old hymns, we picture fireworks,  
but fireworks without the grand finale.

As for the solo vibrato, he reminds me with his left hand  
of poplars in the still air.

I think of Julie Andrews thinking of chocolate mousse,  
Paul Simon contemplating the smooth grind of earth on its axis,

Billie Holiday awash in returned letters.  
Perhaps those high baroque tenors are pondering frying on a spit.

And overblown sopranos have memorized the garish and decrepit  
look of a tulip the day before its petals drop.

For intonation, there's the Cheshire cat, how it feels itself folded  
into harmony with the air, just before evaporating.

For elegant polish, he told us the story of singing "Gloria"  
up at Limerance Lake, at sunrise on the longest day of the year.

Sing the way you throw darts, accurate,  
deliberate, and the note will go right there.

Do not think of the dull thud of the cracked plate placed on the table.  
Avoid, he tells us, any glance to the flowers on the altar,

the unfortunate dissonance  
of the daisy's stale smell.

And for the amen, think of cinching the last loop  
in signing a marriage certificate, think of the unity implied

on the tombstone that read, "Children,  
come look, the mountain is out."

## About Our Contributors

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David Wagoner  
Editor

