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POETRY NORTHWEST

WINTER 1997-1998

Donald Platt

Three Poems

GOLDEN BODHISATTVA WITH A THOUSAND AND ONE HANDS

In the room of many buddhas,
 one dancing, one with downcast
 jade eyes, and the huge, two-story
 sandstone one
 holding up two fingers in blessing,
 it is the small
 brass bodhisattva with six arms
 that makes me most
 want to kneel down, be silent, and not
 continue to write
 this poem too full of my own
 poor living to see
 what is before me.
 He stretches out
 six hands to show us
 the two-headed drum
 shaped like an hourglass,
 curved knife called
 in Tibetan *gri gug*, meaning
 “the chopper,”
 and there, resting in the palm

above it, the skull cup
from which each of us must one day
drink. Another
hand extends towards us
with palm open
in the compassion
mudra, and here
also a lotus blossom floats
on one middle palm's
lily pad, flower of dreaming
and forgetfulness.
The last hand almost touches
index to thumb
to make an interrupted
circle, twentieth-century
American for "It's
OK."

What
do the rest of the bodhisattva's
thousand and one hands,
with an eye on each palm,
see and hold
fast to? One hand caresses
the G clef
of the small of a woman's back
and buttocks.
Another sorts through a bin
of smooth-skinned
purple-black eggplants, feeling
for the soft spots.

Two of the bodhisattva's other
hands attach electrodes
to the head of the Rwandan detainee's
penis, and then
turn on the current. One index finger
presses mute on the remote
control in an editing room and fast-forwards
through Bosnia, Kuwait,

Eritrea, L.A., Detroit, to cut
and splice the bandaged
footage into sound bites.

One hand cuts out
the tongue of a Muslim blasphemer
and makes him
swallow it in the name
of Allah.

Golden bodhisattva, I can hardly
lift up
my failing eyes to look
into your burnished
face with its half smile,
eyelids nearly
swollen shut, and opal urna
like a third eye,
beauty mark in the middle
of your forehead.
Your die-forged mouth
won't speak.

I see only my retarded brother's
hands fumbling
thin strips of purple, orange
and pink fabric,
learning to weave the mismatched
strands into
placemats. "Pretty thing, pretty
thing?" he kept
repeating. It took him weeks
to finish one,
a rectangle in whose ragged, tangled
warp and woof were woven
pain, patience, and, at the last,
a great marveling
incomprehension of the work
of his own hands.

SMALL PARABLE

My anger is a wasp,
the mud dauber
who has built her house
above the back door so my daughter
is afraid to go out.

Together we watch her
patch walls from red clay,
carry crumbs of dirt
and mix it with her own spit.
What patience to construct
this tedious house that dries
in the blank stare of the sun
to stucco hard as stone,
in which she has tunneled out
cells the size of herself
and filled them with spiders
paralyzed by her kiss
and then numbed, crushing
their necks with pincer
jaws, so she may lay
her eggs there, seal them in
with more dirt, and let
them hatch into larvae
who will devour the still living
spiders, grow wings
and fly out of their mud
sarcophagi.

My daughter
shudders at the shadow
of the thread-waisted wasp
humming near our door
and won't go out until
I've knocked the mud house down
and gotten stung. My arm
swells with invisible venom
my body can't digest,

a dull pulse that will
not let me sleep.

The next day
I tell my daughter the mud dauber
has left the stinger beneath
my red infected skin;
she flinches and says she dreamed
the wasp has laid
her eggs within my arm,
that I must be their host
and they will hatch and eat
my dead flesh, and when they are
full-grown, they will bore
through my skin and swarm out
from my arm and land upon her
with a hundred stings.

I hold her and say I'll never
raise my arm in anger
against her again.

MY FATHER CELEBRATES HIS LAST FUNERAL

My father is forgetting things:
the name of the town he lives in,
the combination of the safe
in which he keeps his will,
my mother whom he left
at the gas station. She always
rode in the backseat. Twenty
miles later, he noticed that she
wasn't saying much
in the conversation they'd
been having about St. Francis's
stigmata, heretics,
and the Spanish Inquisition.

He spends his day driving

over the state line to shop
at Price Chopper or the Big Y
("the Big Why," he calls it),
hunting for bargains, bringing
home thirty boxes of raisins,
ten pounds of ziti, a case
of cornmeal muffin mixes,
whatever's on sale that week,
to my perplexed mother who says
he's got too much money
and doesn't know how
to burn it or what to do
with his time, except feud
with the IRS.

Dad pretends not to hear
when my mother reminds him
of his promise to pay
for my daughter's school
next year. "Steal
a dying man's only
money, will you? What I
set aside for the nursing home,
these crappy golden years,
the doctor's bills?"
My father, childhood's cold
earthshaker, thunders still
and hides the checkbook.

His altar boy in red alb
and lace cotta, I used
to swing the censer
like a pendulum
and walk tick-tock.
He was my metronome.
I genuflected when
he did. I was made
out of stained glass.
His hands, small animals
that lived under stones,

burrowed back into
their dark sleeves.

Now he forgets how
to get to the graveyard
where he's promised to come
out of retirement
and celebrate
the Burial of the Dead
for his old friend,
one hundred and three,
who never lost her mind.
Nine days past his eightieth birthday,
he has to stop to ask
directions every five minutes,
and when he arrives hours later
everyone's gone home.
"I am the resurrection
and the life, saith the Lord,"
he mumbles to his muddy shoes
as if reciting the last
rites for what lies dead
and dying within himself.
He stands on the fresh, scarred,
filled-in earth of the grave
and the trampled gladioli.

DUST AND SONG, 1980

Some part of us thinks casket,
 a guitar case open like this on the sidewalk
 in broad day, awkward, intruding, the way death
 demands that we give something, a token
 of grief at least. Part of us sees the case filling
 with ash and dust and someone in a dark suit
 closing the lid. Except

joy
 has usurped the grieving here,
 the players gathered behind the case
 like mourners' alter egos, in tee-shirts
 and overalls, a straw hat, a bare foot tapped
 in time to the wailing
 instruments, voices lifting over traffic and chatter.

So the passersby think
no, not today, it won't be today, not
while this music plays,
 and they toss coins and browse the silvers
 of jewelry and fresh fish and water in sunlight
 where the ferry churns through the Sound toward Alaska.
 They add their own silver
 to the open case, to say with the singers
no, we won't come to ash and dust today,
death is further off than Alaska.
 They brighten the black case with coins

since it's easy to think ash and dust just now
 in this country, in Seattle, when calamity numbers
 the summer's calendar: not twenty-eight days
 into July but sixty into drought, the worst
 since the Dust Bowl, a thousand are dead.
 Ninety-five since the hostage rescue
 ended in ash and sand in the deserts of Iran.
 And seventy-one

since St. Helens blew off its head, bits of it
 still sifting down, Spokane
 like a city turning into the moon.

And it falls on us here
 in Seattle all summer, on Pike Street,
 on the Sound, on the sidewalks,
 on our newspapers,
 in our clothes, in our hair, our dry mouths
 and eyes, inside us where we say *no, not this day,*
 in the cases of fiddles,
 guitars, accordions, flutes, saxes, and zithers
 on streetcorners all over town, where the mountain
 rains down from above and we stand beside
 our small change, sending back song.

LAST THINGS

The sunlight, too, is slowly rolling up
 its patch of carpet. The living room
 broadcasts our footsteps like a stairwell.

The idols have come down from their nails
 and left the walls to stand there stiff
 and functional as butlers.

By the kitchen, where the floorboards would cry
 for their food, by the altar of stacked boxes,
 you swing the teaball from its chain
 as though you'd invoke an old god to preside
 over what we're changing into.

Let's at least praise these last things
 to go. A globe. A hanger.
 Coiled on the landing, a plastic prank dog turd.
 Magic eight-ball key ring. Vaporizer.

Let's have a moment for the forced air,
 the furnace, the dead bolt, the dry rot,

the pilot light, the bird skull. And the elements,
all four: the leaks, the drafts, the dust,
the wiring's fires and misfires—they all wanted
to come, too. They'll make do now
with the moans of our ghosts—

though even those old selves, those shed skins,
might tag along, might already have nosed out
the Ouija board boxed up and taken yesterday.

One night this blustery spring
we'll have just hung the Barnum poster,
The Great Aerial Smiths hanging by their toes
from the trapeze, arms folded, wholly at ease
with a world turned on its head, looking
right at us from behind their framed glass,
when all at once something will take hold
of our windows and shake.

SNAP THE WHIP

Centrifugal, those first places: circles
widening away from the house, the yard—
the limits you were supposed to have feared
left behind in the dust wake of bike wheels.

Your father swings you flat out around him,
then slows till you touch down in a leaf pile.
At school it's planets, orbits, tether ball,
Apollo's round-the-moon slingshot for home.

Your big brother spins the ride in the park
so fast the world blurs, unless you can reach
the slow center; the perimeters teach
more dizzy physics than you can stomach.

And it's there at the heart of *snap the whip*,
too, this same first law of centers, circles,
flyaway force, one of whose articles,
states that you shall be made to lose your grip

it arrives at the end, at the whip's tip.
The last two are the first it separates,

and they go headlong for the summer grass;
then the next two, as the line circles round
this new hub; then everyone's on the ground,
content to be gravity's thralls at last.

And you don't notice the white train of cloud
about to be drawn across the sun's face,
or the cap, ten yards off, like the last trace
of someone who's simply stepped below ground,

or even the black slab of open door
in the distance, over near the grownups—
none of the small signs telling you you'll glimpse
this moment again, years and miles from here,

when what you've tried to hold has slipped your grip
and you're stretched out in park grass, not quite sure
how the force arrived: but less like *laughter*
this time. More than ever like *lash*, like *snap*.

A GLASS FOR A FRIEND ABROAD

Well, here's to the streets of Cork or Spain
and the stout-dark waves of night your body's
trim bark is sailing now,
orange cigarette glow at the prow
and the air an aftermath of rain,
windows the warm yellow-gold of toddies.

Here's to what's happening to your stride
as it learns a new language of turn
and slope, syllables of loose stone
against your feet; to the deeps, the unknown,
there where the next scroll of tide
shows you all that's still left to learn.

And here's to what you've known all along,

that old fiction, *time*. Let the hour-hand
point the finger at whom it will
while the halves past and the quarters still
chime the selfsame song:
light's progress, a shadow crawling the sand.

Back here we look too long at vapor trails,
whisper to the cat in Spanish,
drive to Pittsburgh, the markets, eel on ice,
anything to get us looking twice
and feeling at sea in the details;
to make the brain's rote moorings vanish.

But we're the true voyager's merest shadows;
when we get home Argos is still
the hyperactive pup
whose yipping this morning woke us up
and the valley between our pillows
filled with shepherds, wildflowers, days to kill.

So we're counting on you to be the real thing
for us, unforeseeably delayed
by curbside prophets, by the stories of old walls,
of alleys and archways, catalogued windfalls
of bone mute behind glass or still singing
the lovesong to flesh for which they were made,

the song they raise full-voiced when two
of us embrace. Keep learning to cultivate
for us that superb largesse of days
not *spent*, as if the work of being *pays*
and some plastic sack of product is our due,
but *given* like a gift and like the world can't wait,

like it needs, as Rilke said,
our attentions, praise, devotions—
as we need the thought of you to recall us
to the task, you on that night street mumbling Catullus
or Villon or Aeneas down among the dead;
as we'll need you, at last, to cross oceans,

to come home and tell us, tell us all, first-hand,
and still a bit bewildered
as though it were hard to settle your eyes on
us, each face a remote horizon
with a glimpse of unreachable land,
and each voice the cry of a circling bird.

But after talking, after a time,
our hearts will drift your way, yours will drift ours,
until once when this glass and your glass meet
we'll have joined you on that damp street—
remembering, when our glasses chime,
a church on the coast that kept the hours.

LOCKED

Back from a flat-out day in New York, the museum,
the bus squeals into Hartford, drops us on a badly lit
dead-end at ten p.m., one block from the ghetto.

Some idiot has locked our cars behind the ten-foot
wrought iron fence and padlocked the chain-linked gates.
We bang on the chains; no guard anywhere.

We call police; they don't come. We flag down
a firetruck. They say they've no right to break in
and don't do a damn thing for us.

Exhausted, thirsty, we lean against the fence
in the blue city dark. From a tenement's second story,
a woman belts out an aria of pain:

Fuck you, you liar, you fucking asshole.
Above the cries of a child, above the raped-woman
howl of a siren, she belts it.

I know you're cheating. I can't take it.
I'm leaving.
Do you hear me? I'm leaving now.

We might be sitting in a theater where the picture's
gone dark, that's how bigger-than-life, almost mythic,
her voice is, pouring through the clouded night,

across backyards, across the universe.
She might be singing for all of us, so cold, so numb
in our own dead-end, wanting water, wanting to pee.

Then it stops. Restless as streetwalkers in the silence,
we pace up and down the fence. Blonde in black leather,
diminished, she wobbles on spikes out of haze.

Asks how come we're there — middle of nowhere.
We crowd around but she only laughs: *You think cops
will come. Ha! They never come.* And she staggers off.

Who knows what spurs on the guy, then, in the wrinkled
blue suit who suddenly leaps — condemned man's last lunge —
up ten feet of wrought iron, swings one leg over the top,

balances endless seconds above spikes and razor wire,
before he flings the other over and jumps down
to our furious cheers. And who cares

by what right he rifles the cars for tools, and skilled
as a cat man, dismantles the lock — or by what right all of us
lean our shoulders into the heavy gate, shove it back,

leap for our cars, and get the hell out of there.

IN THE BASEMENT OF THE FIRST CHURCH

In the kitchen the woman who carries her clothes
in a shopping cart, stirs soup, a rich mahogany
broth. It boils in the iron cauldron.
I have given her this job which she loves
for the way it lifts her into a person.

The people are gathering in the dining room —
straying in one by one out of the cold Square,
dumping their frayed coats on a long table.
The other tables are set; the soup is ready.

But before we can serve, the Director begins
a speech about value and popularity.
He stands on a loft above us
where he cannot see the people
sitting expectantly at the long tables.

There has been a vote to decide who among us

is the most popular;
gold stars have been awarded.
He is announcing stars
and he does this very slowly beginning with one star

and working up to ten. The soup
is getting cold. The people are getting hungrier
and hungrier. He doesn't see their hunger.
Not the time, or the cold, or my voice
in his ear — can stop him.

Finally it is too late and the cold useless soup
is removed and the people
whose needs were so great,
file out, hunger filling their stomachs.

The director, who sees none of this, goes on
with his endless words, while the cook —
who has become nothing again —
and the staff people — who are again reminded

they are not worth anything —
gather in the kitchen
and fight like birds at a feeder
over the leftover loaves.

Erin Malone

Two Poems

WAVE AND PARTICLE

One

Proof that spirits are working — sun prints
when my eyes shut, orange
firecracker, wild bee.

Two

The house is a hotbed
of static. Wave

upon wave, the sheets
dry lightning, doorknobs

urgent underhand...
The iron chandelier

is shocking. I conduct:
my fingers hover

above the digital clock,
stop it cold. Power

suddenly makes sense.
I am made

of energy, I pump it
like a heart, a fist.

Three

Your impulse follows me.

Four

In olive trees there are little bones hearing out
the wind. In her garden everything is possible,
the yellow moon
locking the cat's eye to bottom the reflecting pool

deep as a bullfrog's chant. We live without
mirrors, listen hard
as night sounds open a wide place in the earth. My
uncle is a ghost.
My aunt plays their song, winding back the tape, a foot
of light in the doorway.

VIEW FROM A HOLE

By definition,
less. I work
keeping the field
at eye-level.

First I noticed just
how I fit
in this gap: arms
at my sides,

skin pulled tight,
in my legs the darts
and needles
of sleep. The ground

tasted cold
as a spoon. Night
after night
the same panels

filled out the dark,
the same four stars
squared the moon.
I wanted

to go home.
But I got used
to being held. I learned
how to rock

on my toes to see
farther, to rest
my chin on the bare
edge of things.

In winter I live
in the freeze
and spangle
of long grass, in summer

I track the small-time
vagaries of cows.
Whole tribes of ants
build here.

And now I think
this is not less.
Not less,
just more to fill.

NIGHTWALKING

*Words are also actions,
and actions are a kind of words.*

—Emerson

The drowsy star. Surrender
to a window, then a door.
What I saw holds until
I walk into night's waxing tide
that rises far from anywhere
to seep even into crevices
of a violet's tincture.
As it settles into unknown expanse.
the ear begins to tune
to sudden lives that now
inhabit it. The corners of
once familiar paths are turned
into a dance of alert beginnings.
Circles lure me aimless into
the slowly discerning dark
until fires once banked into
dimmed harmonics flicker slowly
into parts, sharp echoes that
resurrect apple-green. I walk
through purlieus of beaten glass,
through wide doors, as rivers mutter up
into the hall of yellow wings.
White waves break where the
pitched boat still drifts off.
Part by part, bright costumes
of wind spread and settle. Time
begins again, ticking away,
faster, becoming variations
on itself, wobbling under its own
weight until it crashes,
a car wreck from which
one only walks away, wide-awake,
alert, prepared again.

ARS AMATORIA: CHORUS FOR ST. VALENTINE'S DAY

Strophe:

Bird tracks I followed from feeder across snow,
across snow from feeder bird tracks
that disappeared into chiasmus then reappeared
from under the book I'd left open as I fell asleep
& hopped into my mind dreaming of time as
an enormous light inside a bear in his cave
seeming to die, but no, the glamour is still on him,
while the great sickle rises over him
in a billion billion volts & night wears on
& great distance & time stops here
where my wife is asleep & naked beside me

Antistrophe:

In the morning I find myself standing
where the bobcat bit a meadow vole in half,
her hind legs sticking out of the snow & not a speck
of blood, as if she is coming out of a bloodless dream
backwards or diving headfirst for figurines
in some wintry wreck. Am I too old for saints?

Strophe:

I am standing again in night up to my waist,
wanting to shout *encore* to the whole scene
& mean it, my gray whiskers flaring behind
the woods, silver wire pointing to dwarf stars,
bloody lips chomping on the white arm beside me,
on the stumps of unreason swollen the way pebbles
light up underwater to make unthought-of dark flowers

Antistrophe:

The lady lies on clean sheets, eyes scanning the black sea,
until beside her a seal's face breaks the surface,
opens his mouth, tries to chew sky & spit stars
like words & music, but what makes out are little birds
making a living, making do, making tracks across the blank page
of an implausible sky, tracks she follows

Kirk Robinson

WOMAN, ASLEEP, WITH HER HEAD RESTING
ON *THE CLASSICS OF WESTERN DRAMA*

Something tells me it's not Aeschylus or *Oedipus*
she's dreaming of, or Estragon embattled with a shoe,
as she's splayed out on this bench, on this campus,
on this day when maybe she's heard all she wants to hear

about Mankind's great themes. She knows Willy Loman
inside-out; even wrote five pages "On the Function
of the Staircase in Brecht and Miller," but what
has that got to do with her own bills to pay?

She could have named The Theater of the Absurd
all by herself. After all, didn't she want to jump
from Genet's humongous *Balcony*? Hasn't she herself,
too often recently, been A Character In Search of an Author,

or Paper-topic, an extension to that none-too-metaphysical
Due Date? She was smart enough to leave Pinter's *Birthday Party*
before the cake and ice-cream, and you don't need
to be the least bit bookish to see her professor as a *Rhinoceros*.

There's no doubt, the required text for this course
is thick enough to serve as a pillow, and maybe that will clinch it,
maybe this will be the one she doesn't sell back to the bookstore
for far too little. But, what about right now? As she dreams herself

into a lovely field of beans, riding along on a green tractor, her tomcat
sending her smoke-signals from a windbreak of trees...
What does any of that have to do with *Desire Under the Elms*,
here, on a Tuesday, when there is nothing better to do?

Gary Gildner

ROBESPIERRE

Here's to the rooster Robespierre
who is getting ready,
who is beside himself
admiring and full
and not to be denied,
who, refused first prize
at the Idaho County Fair
for a single feather stuck out wayward
in his rich, rust-colored tail,
is throwing back his head now, is letting go
loud and pure enough to raise all manner
of lovers, not only farmers constantly moved by morning
but angels too, flushed, loosed from conjugal eiderdown wrap
and haystack, from sweat-slickened horse tack and rodeo straw
tossed in the box of a pickup—crowing, crowing across
the Camas prairie and beyond is grand Robespierre,
to the Sawtooths, the Seven Devils, Hell's Canyon, and
the Gospels
catching moose bowing in their first delicious browse,
catching young boys shaken and rolled
from silky, shimmering dreams into their backbones,
catching the whiled turkey blinking above his wattles,
catching even
the politician cowering, confused by such clear, inspired song—
husky, sky-throated Robespierre the unbeatable, complete bird
holding his bent, independent feather up high,
here's to you and the quickened day,
the day uncommon, touched, gloriously breaking.

John Allman

THE STONE

Think of it almost as in
the kidney, where failure to
pass it stores heat that left
to itself could ignite a forest:
renewal from blackness in blazing
star, bastard toadflex, bluestem
grass, but at great cost
to the creek suddenly harrowed.
How many creatures swim
though burning straw?

Grit helps the eye to see.
It identifies movement.
It makes light out of pain.
It marks the shadows that slide
out of all things. It defines
distances between the edge
of an orange and a blade,
the moon wincing in the sky,
these days you can
hardly face yourself.

There is leakage. Mysterious
breaks in Arctic pipes
beneath permafrost, where
a black ribbon sinks
toward fragile vegetation
like gangrene. But it takes
years to get there, the
River Pechora a tributary
of your industrious
thought, flowing south.

We live on the surface
of clearness expanding,
mountains moving from the sea.
A great Attractor

warps the perfect round
like the long vowels of a
song, and there is time
within time. Depth without
width. A flatness
of tone.

There is the sum of
motes that will dim
the moon. There is this
particle of sweetness, a calcium
hesitation, a speck of thought
that forces all else
to swirl around it,
a stone in the stream
that is your blood and mine
rushing along like love.

THE BOOK OF THE RIVER

Look, you don't just roll this life on, do your business, pinch it off your shriveled soul, and sling it out the window down at the boat ramp.
Kid comes along chunking rocks, sticks the point of his stick into the rude lip of it, flips it high, to worm out of the sky onto his cousin's shoe.

Flood comes along one day
and lifts it like a strip of newsprint,
takes it downstream, round the bend into the branches of an uprooted tree.
Water recedes.

We drift.
Our mother's in front. Our father works with the motor.
As with every frustration on every trip, his arm and neck swear a sweaty: *This is not my fault*,
Somebody moves the ice chest.
We don't care if he hurts us, mind—steps back on our foot, pinches our finger badly when he moves the rods—it is only important that he doesn't know.

The current delivers us to the tree.
Motor's coughing. Nothing sounds more like two men going at it than a boat getting caught in the upper branches of a dead tree in the water.
Daddy's *unhh, what?, unhh* when he turns, catches the edge of the boat with his forearm, falls back, and the crack of brittle branches like ribs.
Ease, slow, slow and easy, crack, easy into the easy tree.
We all look at Momma, her head beneath her shoulders.

And there is your nasty goddamn life, hanging over our mother's head.

Daddy grabs the paddle, sculls back—back-paddling against

the weight of a river so heavy, whole towns use it to name roads and views and law offices.
Now what can a man, even a grown man like Daddy, do against something like that?
All we can do is wait for the tree to finish giving in, and give us back
to the river as though saying *I think that's enough for now*.
Motor starts, and we fly downstream toward the rest of the day, Momma in the high, planing bow. We have a good time.
You don't have to worry about that. We have a good time.
We never mention it, but don't you go thinking for one minute that we have forgotten your little glorious ugly in our lives.

REUNION

When those you've loved or diddled a little or both begin to lie back in their long, last beds, their sweet and sour mouths laced closed, their names come up from the grave.
Tom or Don—you know, dated that ugly girl whose last name rhymed with *beige*.
Those firm boobs or buttocks bob up in your cafe latte.

Remember how you forgot all the world's crap with just one whiff of what's-her-name?
Well, she died.
Mustang Sally travels to the beat of a different drum and her ashes are sitting on the dock of the bay waiting for a bottle of wine, fruit of the vine, to be allowed to breathe under the board walk one last time. Fantasticks.

But it's almost late. Almost time for almost all of us to begin cutting back to go home or back to our discounted rooms. (There are some—we know from ourselves—who will go back to the room, change again, hide their cash and go out to stay, maybe the rest of the trip.) But cheers

to the cheerful rest of us—last call for alcohol.
 Last call for an overhaul; let's all ride up together
 to the Top of the Town, a nightcap in the revolving bar.
 The elevator door closes. A surge,
 electric click-thump for *up*, which sounds
 not unlike a possible *no* in a fogged up VW years ago.
 We rise. Rise, and the lights on the panel, the bell in the air
 say at each floor *not this, nor this, nor this, nor this*,
 as more get on, those who, back then, got it on—
 got off on this or that recording, issue, skin, or shirt,
 come aboard now as in the good old days.
 You're taking on weight. *Ping* There was a boy
 who was a virgin and should have stayed that way;
 you did what you could. *Ping* The girl you tried
 to be tender with and banged your foot on Ted's borrowed bed
 and she broke up for a week because you looked like such a fool
 naked, holding your toe. You didn't know it was her first time,
 so when her first time did come later in the term
 there was something grand in a magnolia tree, her on a branch
 in the drizzling rain outside the chapel—she the great V in the tree,
 and you so well rooted for once.
 MAXIMUM LOAD THIS CAR: 2400 LBS.
 You begin to suck in. *Ping* Another. *Ping* Others.
 And here's the girl who brings on the extra weight
 of her dead baby. And those of you who knew—that's ever
 so many more dead babies' weight. *Ping* The heaviness of the air
 under the left hip stump of Schnoeflock who should have kept
 his damn grades up.
 Is the army now all volunteer? Does no one get drafted
 anymore? *Ping*
 A crate of notes from the hometown doctors in scribbling hand—
save this white boy's ass; I know his father.
 The car's beginning to groan. 2400 What are we up to now?
 We're getting close. *Ping* All those guilty prayers
 in the intervening years: sent up
 not like incense or billows from a burning lamb
 —up and forever—but rather like so many blobs in a lava lamp.
Ping Someone says: *Kind of quiet for a reunion.*
 And someone says: *Getting a bit late for me.*
 And several sigh relief for the piece of truth we can taste.

By the time we get to the top, the cables have had enough.
 2400 pounds: Now is that you by yourself
 pudging up all these years, or is that all of you together as you are?
 2400 pounds. How much is that in American money?
 How much is that in names, or lights, or lies,
 and yes, a love or two, and baked Alaskas,
 routine blood work and the accompanying bad news?
 Groan, strain.... *Ping Ping!*—everybody out up there;
 You can't win a door prize without going through the door.
Ping Ping Ping Hold the door. We're with you.
 All right, everybody, here we go:
 Who has the most children?
 Who has changed the least?
 Who can remember all the verses to our old song?

Linda Greenmun

WHEN THE SUN-FILLED BOWL EMPTIES

the absence left calls for aromatic skin, the cut halves releasing
 a tang on autumn air. Juicing the pulp counters the measure
 that raps against the windowpane, the cold of mountain rain.
 Water, sugar, the slow heat from the stove, three yolks
 and the boiling pot beds a minor storm of solar flares.
 Meringue top, lemon filling in a crimp-edged crust
 will not bring back the swallowtail, the cabbage,
 flitting among penstemon, stonecrop, rose.
 No. It allows us to weigh the older light
 in fallen maple leaves, the long hum
 you raise sleep into, this pull
 with which we begin again
 lifting up and up
 on the wheel of days.

MATISSE, AT BREAKFAST, CONSIDERS THE WOMEN

These, he says, are as fine as harps.
 Fluid-boned, gold-scented, luminous,
 mine. I am roused every morning
 by thighs I think to such
 roundness they grow heavier than fruit.
 Matisse, they call, if you lie with us,
 palm leaves will drape like painters' hands.
 Cheese will ripen. Persimmons will mound themselves
 in the bowls. I listen to the women.
 My clear head draws thick lines
 around the bed, the curtains, their lidded eyes.

An old man takes care of them.
 He tells me that at night, when they bathe,
 their long arms arch into silver
 fins and they purl the river bottom
 with their cold eyes turned skyward.

He brings the maids to me early, still
 cool from the water. He says when they swim
 they have stars on their shoulders.
 They have cut and dazzling hearts.

AFTER FLORIDA

*Lagoon: Aren't you one of the seven wonders
 of the Paradise of painters?*
 —Henri Matisse, *Jazz*

The water, with a terrible gentleness,
 tore me apart.
 Moon green, rimmed with a wilderness
 of flowers. Round revelations.

The cosmos is a body brimming with hibiscus.
 Yellow disk, shower of petals.
 The waitress with an orange brought
 me a hat. She stood on the balcony.

Held fierce palms. Could I compose
 the sea in all its variations? Plum dark,
 sand crusted, full as the hips
 of those drowsy women who rise like whole notes

from its mouthful of salt. I ate
 the bread. I broke the surface of the pool
 when the bathers closed their lucent eyes.
 Candlefish burned like savage horns.

Peg Boyers

RING

One swift transaction—a bargain
as delicate as the frieze of rubies
garnishing your band—and you might have
become something more than a ring, or less:
gold of erasure, extinction, exile,
a mineral ransom of history.
But you, Survivor, escaped the pawnbroker's
scale, and were spared the iniquitous
return to the furnace.

She sewed you into her corset
so she could feel your ore, a lode
at her waist. Each day she would tighten
the belt around her thinning middle,
till the hidden ring pushed against her
at the appropriate place, comforting, round.
Your hard touch at her fingertips:
memories for endurance.
A talisman for the future.

Today the policeman leads me to the
local pawn shop. Rod Steiger
reaches under the glass.
His hand follows my hand
until at last it lands on you.
The rest were melted.
She brought it with the
candlesticks, he says, grabbing
behind him for the menorah.

After Vilno, Vitebsk, Warsaw,
how could you collude
with one so venal?
A babysitter's betrayal—
petty theft to satisfy a habit
of dust and reverie—
and the circle is complete,

the orbit of loss and recovery,
trust, treachery and then again loss,
The Dorf. The Pogrom. The Dispersal. The Pawn.

Frances Richey

EVENING IN PARIS

for my mother

Mrs. Ammons gave me this Evening
In Paris. It's just cheap perfume
in a fancy box. There's powder
and lotion too. Her husband gave it to her
the night she asked me
to roll her bed to the other side
of the ward, where midnight drifted
in through a circular window, silvery blue
as the foil covering her
box. She wanted to watch the snow, shining,
as if the moon were behind it quietly falling
to pieces. I was breaking
the rules. She could catch a chill.
But it was Christmas eve, and in the morning
her husband would turn to me, trembling,
with that same box, and say
she wanted me to have it.
Miss Creeson had warned us, when you leave
the hospital, you leave the patients there
or you'll never get through training. I lost
my bib and cap for wheeling Mrs. Ammons,
her dark hair gleaming
wet, under the blue halo,
her eyes brilliant,
as if she could see into the snow
and through it to the breathless
City of Lights.

NEW YEAR'S EVE

I was driving, the kids in back asleep
as you nodded beside me.
Fat flakes of snow swirled down out of
the greyness and were swished away
by the wipers. I couldn't see the river,
only feel it out there urgent and black
beyond the road, its near edge
sealed by a lid of ice. Something
bolted through our lights and was gone,
the figment of a living
thing, felt, yet barely visible, that lingered
at the back of my mind and
lunged on fierce through the drifts,
beast or its ghost receding, circling.
There is no end to our separateness—
what makes us love one another
is knowing how frail and lost we are.
At the cabin, each with a child bundled
in our arms, we climbed to the loft
and those rickety web-strewn cots.
Far in the night I woke to the sound
of snow falling, a soft tampering,
lovely indescribable. Over each face
a dim halo of breath rose in the cold
and lingering for a moment was woven
with the others, then nothing if not gone.

COYOTESKIN

Keck say you can hear them yipping
back of his place. Says walk
until the moan of a generator
turns to a hum on the wind
and you catch it, a cacophony of
barks and whines like the reincarnating
cries of the damned blown down
on a gust from Electric City. I make it
as far as the tackshed, but hear nothing.
Through a window on a table
splayed in moonlight lies the hide
of a coyote rinsed in a tawny glow.
As I enter, the slits of the eyes
make me wonder—what are the dead
that they can touch us, a shiver like static
as I run my fingers over the satin
fur and glancing out the window
see old Keck dumping trash
he burns in a barrel, his figure
aureoled against the snow, hands
making a slow rhythmical motion
as he tosses something into the flames,
the sparks rising from his fingers
seen by wild eyes far away,
coyotes who just now lift their song.

FIREWEED

I could say his eyes as he looked
darkened like fall-ripe berries
or that the pods of tall dried weeds
were bursting, the slopes flocked
with torches, each stem spurting
its fluff like smoke. But what
would it mean—that desire splits
from its parched husk, or a wind
scissors the hems of a cloud
and scatters the scraps all morning,
fall a gospel of ecological proverbs
spouting versions of the same theme,
to wit—we die in order to be reborn?
It doesn't mean a thing, but I know
my seven-year-old son is hurt
and amazed at the same time,
the way his eyes start swimming
as a seed-tuft drifts beyond his fingers,
when he slips off his pack
and like one relieved of body-weight
stretches onto his toes and groping
catches it, pinches the wisp
and crushes tiny nuggets of seed
he blows from his hands like ashes.

Michael Cadnum

THUNDER

Every insensate object,
drawer-pull, chair leg,
butter knife burns
just for a moment when
the current is just so.

Paper clips
aware, pencils awake,
spoons alive to the dark
cage of the dishwasher.
It doesn't linger; awareness

never does. The light bulb's
filament startled, the carpet's
nap stiff,
the trousers draped over
the chair heavy with

static. It is already
fading, this sifting
phase of whatever moon
around whatever distant
planet awakens and stills.

Enough

that it is over, and being
night again that day
will stumble into light
once more. The sock
faithful in its sleep,
the ax in its certitude.
Everything lasts.

Kevin Stein

HOME ECONOMICS

If not the Betty Crocker commercial,
then the smell of vanilla extract,
an oven timer slicing kitchen quiet:

something to trapdoor a winter afternoon
beneath memory's ornate noose
which is, alas, a noose nonetheless.

To put my neck in, is to feel the clock's tick tock,
the porch knocker clacking,
to be the boy jerking open the oak door

for impeccable Mr. Burke,
tanned above polished loafers topped off with dimes.
He's come for this week's cake,

devil's food with chocolate icing
spritzed to resemble the sailboat
he floats the murky lake in — *Lady Luck*,

all teak and brilliant brass.

Mother tents an Eisenhower hair net
over her bouffant —
cleanliness as style and substance.

She bakes other folks' cakes, pies, cookies.
No one says *women's work*.
No one has to.

This morning, her son poured a proud cloud of flour,
broke the yolk blood streaked through.
He stirred and fidgeted, prayed bleak rain

would crack to sun and endless ball games.
You, oh son oblivious to this necessarily secondary drama
of your youth,

I'd like a word with you.

Boy, what are you thinking
when you tote the tin cake pan
to the car for a lousy nickel's tip,

your peach-fuzz cheek pinched pink?
What don't you see when the crisp five passes
his hand to hers?

She cracks her Ball jar hoard
not for mink or pearls
but day-old bread and Mrs. Paul's Fish Sticks —

the dreck poor Catholics choke down.

Boy with ants in his pants, look me in the eye.
Ask what she thinks
of home economics — her eye rocking

from sink to cheap clock
chiming your father home from work?
How graceful she makes this waltz

with ball and chain, with love.

Boy, sleepily square,
oh son oblivious: Wake up, wake up.

Gary Fincke

IN THE HOUSE WITHOUT FABLES

In the house without fables
the animals were unhappy.
The dog did nothing but bark.
The cats muttered literal meows.

On their orange plastic wheels,
the hamsters spun and spun
until the terrible times brought
stories not ending with lessons.

Smoke floated nowhere but downwind.
Twilight was always the start
of darkness and the night noises
of sex and hunger, all the wings

flapping in the awful flight
of the domestic turkey.
From the second-story windows
of that house, from our bedrooms,

we watched the nearest neighbors.
Across the darknesses
between us and their rooms,
we imagined the weak lights

of myth. They might have been
televisions flickering through
the evenings, or else we saw
nothing when the youngest died

but the raccoon which clawed
at our curled drainpipe, stuck
just outside our window,
its teeth bared at our sudden light.

Oliver Rice

HELEN OF SPARTA

*Daughter of the chieftain of
Sparta, she grew up amid
whisperings about her remarkable
beauty and about a tale that
her true father was a god.*

May we leave the gods out of this?
Those despicable, ridiculous, improbable Greek gods?
Let us give her a human girlhood,

in the sun, in the wind,
in amethyst beads among the jittery,
the brave-bearded,
the chastising, the bleak.
Did she titter, would you suppose,
the torches flickering in the family hall?
Was she solitary?
Fleet as any sibling?

Yes, yes, of course, this is all surmise.
But history, after all, is one of the muses.

Was she fearful of the hunting dogs?

Impertinent with old wives in the market?

Piqued by mint and sesame,
a black horse, the river,
voices of the street?

Had she an inkling of consequence,
omens rustling in the oak leaves,
signal fires flashing on the mountain peaks?

o

*Courted by many, she married
Menelaus, somewhat her senior,
now chieftain of Sparta, bore
him a daughter but no heir.
Rumors of her supernatural
beauty had spread afar.*

This is prehistory, you understand,
long before the times of the scribes called Homer.
These were ruthless, quick-witted men
who preferred plunder to trade,
pagans
who knew neither fork nor napkin
and made free with serving girls.

Give her a womanhood, then,
barefoot about her quarters,
sandaled and robed in the villages,
soft-spoken or easily vexed.

Did she hum at her embroidery?

Endow her with habits of hand,
a tilt of shoulders,
empathies, antipathies,
a sunlit sanity or wintry discontent.

Did she brush the child's hair?

Take into account the beekeeper, the smith,
walls hung with weapons,
gorse turning brown in August,
the departure of messengers,
beggars at the outer gates,
droves on the hillsides.

Provide her with conjugal lore
and other information essential to the female.

Give her long thoughts.

◦

*Paris, divine favorite in the
myths, son of the ruler of Troy,
ancient rival of the Greeks
for control of the Hellespont,
for spoils and renown, arrived
without explanation, claiming
hospitality. Young, resplendent,
he grew attentive to her. During
the absence of Menelaus on a
campaign, they departed together,
bearing treasures from her dowry.*

A good story, they say, is about everybody.
Dear person, is this story about you?

Each nightfall, the boats put in at the nearest island.

Lie near her in the tent.
Listen to her breathing.

◦

*The Greek chieftains, loyal to
Menelaus, assembled in due course
and took ship for Troy. A ten-year
war ensued, during which she was
revered by some within the besieged
city for her marvelous presence
and despised by others as the cause
of their hardships, of the carnage
taking place on the plain below,
and of the grief endured by the
families of the fallen. Accounts
reached her of enraged single combat
between Menelaus, Paris, and other
heroes.*

Observe how the women fall silent as she passes.

Hear the plaints in the lower town,

the whimpers of hungry children.

Do you wish small absolutions for her,
the clashes, the cries,
the clouds of dust rising from the field?
Or not,
the stench on the twilight mist
of cadavers burning?

Do you wish to comfort her,
the marsh frogs croaking at false dawn,
her mother rubbing sweet verbena in her hair,
traders coming in the spring with bright cloth,
her own daughter a mother, perhaps, by now?

Or not?

*Paris proved dishonorable and
was slain. As the Trojans went
down to abject ruin, she made
frantic appeals to his brothers,
married one of them, betrayed
him to the Greeks, and submitted
to the mercy of Menelaus. Despite
his years of fierce condemnation,
he was enthralled again at the
sight of her, and they departed
with her treasure for Sparta.*

Those seas are hazardous,
as some of the returning chieftains are to learn.

The bedraggled troops, halved in number,
slouch among the oarsmen on the long black ships.

On what bench in this open air
does she make a privacy?

Give her frames of mind.

*The warriors straggled home to their
clans and the circumstances, in some
cases dire, that had developed in
their absence. She was restored to
her position and survived to a normal
age for a woman of her time.*

Now.

Certain events befall her daughter, husband, sister,
others of her acquaintance.
But never mind all that for now.

Let us think of the afternoons
of her person,
her mortality,
her worth,
the cranes flying west
above the stubborn red earth.

Do you wish to stroll with her, sit with her
in the fretful heat of summer,
the stale rooms of winter?

Perhaps she will have moments of candor,
adjusting the clip at her shoulder,
fingers trembling so slightly.

What is it you wish her to say?

Is there something you wish to tell her,
interrupting her pastime, her chore?

Or not?

About Our Contributors

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Poetry Northwest Prize Awards, 1998

MACLEOD-GROBE PRIZE: \$500

Molly Tenenbaum for "Ode to the Ugly Colors"
(Winter 1997-98)

BULLIS-KIZER PRIZE: \$200

Cathleen Calbert for Three Poems (Summer 1997)

THEODORE ROETHKE PRIZE: \$200

Oliver Rice for "The Agent" (Spring 1997)
Four Poems (Autumn 1997)
"St. Augustine, July" (Winter 1997-98)

RICHARD HUGO PRIZE: \$200

Vicki Angel for
"This Poem Will Never Be Published" (Spring 1997)
and Two Poems (Autumn 1997)

