



Poetry

NORTHWEST



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Editor
David Wagoner

Cover from a photo of a
storage facility on a farm
north of Stanwood, Washington

Photo by Robin Seyfried

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POETRY NORTHWEST

WINTER 1999-2000

John Bensko

Three Poems

ROTHKO

I.
I'd like to tell you a story, he said.
He was sitting in his studio, you know how he was,
past middle age and fat, his eyes behind
those glasses more and more myopic.
It's about a little girl, he said,
and it has nothing to do with why you're here,
nothing to do with art I mean. It's just a story.

Emotion without image, at worst
the wonder of sitting in an empty room.

So he went on, and I was losing interest.
Half the time, you know, he didn't make sense,
like those dark paintings he did before
he died. You stare at them for hours and where
does it get you? This thing about the little girl,
it was just about seeing her each day
on his way home, how she was always skipping rope.

II.
One rectangle is blue, another red, another yellow.
No, this sounds too simple. You can't do this
and call it a lie.

So I said, tell me what it means, and I meant
the painting he was working on, but he said

it means I hated her. He turned
and didn't say another word. Painting,
he stubbed the green in hard
as if to press it through.

Suicide. Approaching, its slow form
marks him, like the rhyming of a poem, a color.
Shading saves the day, like love and forgiveness.

III.

The dark purple at the top is both the lid
of the grave and the spirit as it rises. Below,
the red is the grave and the body
of the man who lies in it. Sunk into the ground,
into the burnt orange which is life,
the earth takes from the sun this empty grave.
Yes, my friend, in the field above it
which we do not see, a girl is skipping rope.
The grass is high and August turns it golden brown.
We have to imagine this.

The artist knows it is not the same for everyone.
Above the field he sees the mirror image
of the grave, a lake. The day drifts into evening
and he can hear the girl's father calling her to dinner.
There is not enough time, enough space to get above this loneliness.

In the story, the girl is on a street corner.
The critic goes home sick
at the loss of his hero. Sentiment, he says,
where does it get you? The girl skips.
The world burns over. Burnt orange.

RAGE FOR ORDER

Over six foot six and able to see
a country mile, for my Grandfather Blanton
the garden rows were never straight enough,
fixed by transit to his hair's width

distinctions. To my grandmother, small, wandering
her tight yet nimble fingers
down the lines of beans, nothing mattered
but space enough to put her knees.

He was a mason, the kind that sets up lines
to lay the brick of houses.
All across the county, he'd put up
the walls of churches, sure to last

for centuries. She was his failure,
too small and sure framed
to need the brick at all,
hampered by his weighty visions.

She told him the straighter rows
shone like a beacon for birds.
He answered that birds were not his concern.
Let them fall where they may.

I loved them both, in summers lying
between the rows of iris
they'd transplanted from their city home,
here to the country where stripped

from their terraces the flowers drooped
and shifted their heads, bewildered
as a crew of land-locked sailors
on a wide prairie. Above me
the bees and hummingbirds

wove a sound I thought of
as the cloth of flowers.
While beyond, the two bickering voices

sharpened themselves on each other
like blades of scissors.
I knew enough to stay out
of their endless travels

back and forth from hatred to delight.
Tall, white haired, like a god,
he moved across the new plowed ground
unballing his twine. Already springing up,

and sure to reach his height
sooner than I could hope, I waited
low down, head hidden between the flowers,
knowing she was there somewhere

with me, her small fingers
working the loose earth,
tiny, sure-footed animal
ready to battle him, hair by hair.

PLASTER OF PARIS

It was dark where she led me, both of us
barely thirteen, to her mother's workshop.
Rubber casts for plaster were heaped
like an orgy of emptiness. Wet clay hung
in plastic bags making heads more fearsome
than the white deer which stalked the floor.

Love at first sight. Her eyes met mine
in the Mid-America Mall. Now, uncertain first
moments, surrounded by silent
covens of the nude, powdered forest.
Ellen. I would never see her again. But we hid

behind the oven still warm and touched
as if we might feel a way to mold a life.
The Irish pointer, his body half painted,
showed the way. A nearby gnome was shy,

nodding to the open window.
Ellen's hot breath and lips were a flock
upon me. In the colorless glade, even a saint
might be swept like a pile of crumbs.
The heat grew. The dark hardened

its failed colors. Just when we would crack,
the door, her mother, the cool night
rushed in. Flurried as the geese I was flung
by my collar into the waiting
yard of birdbaths like a wide-eyed ghost.

Tossed beyond whiteness, do the dead
recall only a bleached world, a few
flushed faces? I looked back. *Again,*
her mother screamed at her.
I slunk off. A new life of shame.
Thank you, I might have said to them. I scraped
the powder from my knees and touched it
to my tongue. *Kiss off, you old bitch,* I said.
I doubt they heard me, or cared.

A VOYAGE TO ATLANTA CITY

—for Barbara Pucci

Atlantic City is not in the Atlantic Ocean.
(If you throw a blue chip into the Atlantic Ocean
it just sinks, whereas a blue chip in Atlantic City
may struggle for a few minutes first.)
It is a different place from Atlanta, where
the Oglethorpes and the antelopes play,
and has nothing to do with Atalanta,
a virgin huntress of antiquity who will
probably not reappear in this account.
Neither Atlantic City nor Atlanta is the
site of the ancient lost continent of
Atlantis (although Atalanta, who seems to
have swerved back into our lesson,
may have stomped an anthill or two there.)
Current thinking holds that Atlantis might actually
have been modern Crete and sank into the sea
because of the overcrowded souvlaki restaurants
concentrated in the alleys of central Heraklion.
Or: a suburb of prehistoric Antwerp (which, in fact,
is the sneering insult Atalanta fired at Hippomenes.)
Clement Attlee was mayor of Atlantic City, unfortunately
at the same time as Charles Atlas, who kicked sand
at him with dreary and predictable regularity until
Attlee retreated to the Antilles disguised as a Catalan.
(He became catatonic, but that broke his blackjack habit.)
None of this has anything to do with Atlantic Avenue,
our savory local shopping street, where the irrepressible
Atalanta, hand in hand with Hippomenes (who
fought the traffic through Cobble Hill to win
the foot race and claim his prize), can frequently
be seen hunting happily for olives in Sahadi's or eating
burritos beneath the spreading ailanthus tree
as the faithful heed the call and face Altoona.

LAST FAMOUS WORDS

nobody realized the language
would end
like a dying sun
some words are already gone
the light gets weaker
every day
silences grow longer
friends meet on corners and
their eyes go blank
in mid-sentence
so much is already
inexpressible

BEANS

So, last three
red beans
in the can
which didn't get
into the pot —
Now you get
squashed
down the drain
and become part
of Staten Island
landfill
instead of becoming
part of me
Don't fear
It all comes
to the same thing

THE NEIGHBORS — I

On the most part I would
contribute this to Thanksgiving:
cooking the turkey early which she
is shrugging off her responsibility not
to sleep and roast in the same period of time.
So after that next a fire burn up
her house like a Kleenex
the trailer which
she is living in so she, Pat, jumps
out in the night and take off across the line
to our abode. Knock, knock,
But no, this answer to that event is,
no way, she can't sleep overdue to she,
Pat, personality-wise, would sell her father
for a piece of fudge on account to where
he must sleep it off in the park
from faulty ways.
Well, this fire is not subdued of wild flames yet
which is now leaping over to our abode
which has brought Frankie Nolls
who is shouting he has simply had it of
the lost of us forever so therefore we
and Pat have Thanksgiving
together and you can guess where.

THE NEIGHBORS — II

Now, I do not hold that he
is lower than I am—why I have felt
so cheap you could buy me all night three
for a dime for we had moved in
right beside where she has but she
haven't mowed. That bitch. Or weeded neither
so he does and now she finds time to visit,
when I am away. Well, one thing lead

to another and I do not hold
where he is wrong in his mind
for I have had my own life
of mingling in the wrong crowd
plus I am not perfect and I had not loved
anyone in the longest period.
Well, one day I had arrived at home
to where he had thrown his clothes in the bath
and himself in to follow for he was dirty as a shoe.
Well, one thing lead to another and I am washing
his parts when he would have the intention
of a pharmaceutical matter or if I would fetch him a beer.
Then, Honey, would you scratch my feet and knees.
Well, I would have liked to poke a stick
to his eye but with my bread
on the side of which it is buttered
I can't complain.

RESPOND BOX 393

Festivals, music, stock cars, quiet times.
I am not opposed to bowling
and I will have only a slight amount if
there is a racket or noise upstairs in a late period
or out which a pleasant gin or modest rum.
In my case, I would prefer to engage
in personalities and get a good fulfillment there.
As for me, you could say I live alone
with my other son
who has got his diploma,
a guarantee of a job if he would get one.
As for me I would prefer to engage
in sharing so you would "like or enjoy" mini golf
or darts and cards and he, you,
the man, dentist, genius, business executive,
aristocracy.
You would not be a menace
but he would be a gentleman: high quality,
is decent, no convictions please, plus
he would have a good intention

to keep his nose clean and he would be a gentleman
in how it takes place, picnic, ride a boat, go out.
Well, that's about it. Well,
as for me I keep myself as high
as possible in excellent moral values
and you would say I am lying about my age.

Bruce Bond

LESTER YOUNG

Just why he flared his tenor to the side,
head cocked, reed-clamp twisted in its neck,
why he bore the bell's weight in one hand—

hours on end he braced it there—as the other
fluttered over the low valves, his cool
resolve flush with wind...no one ever knew.

Sure, there were theories: for the timbre,
the women; as he put it, *for the birds*.
Each night his sax's bella donna floated

over the fire of tones he would never match,
never could, however many reeds he cut;
something in his tenor dreamt it was a flute,

lithe and buoyant, a horizon in his lips.
And when he sank into solos, his head
heavy, bemused, you could spot the black

stones of his eyes, gin-soaked and gleaming;
discouragement or desire, he drowned it
in music: sluggish grains of jailtime, slip-

knots in a woman's gaze, one day's rhythm
of Pall Malls and minor cash going through him,
or the huge sums to young tenors who copped

entire lines he played; even music itself,
his saxophone shushing the world-shore,
drowned in the sea of a larger music.

With every spark that pinned a tie or cuff,
he wrapped himself in flash like a magician's
disappearing act. Final days in a bed

at the Alvin, high above the riff of traffic,
it took a stack of LP's to put him under...
that and the wide-eyed lights of the room.

Death was a flair of embittered birds borne up
by gravity. Who could hear him and not love
that sound, the way it lingers, how he raised

a stamen at phrase's end: who wouldn't eat
the lotus blooming there; with every record
a widened pupil falling on its spindle.

TROPHIES

Any lost citizen of the wild
wandering our land didn't live very long.
Most, for instance, were consumed
but a few selected and undressed
to brighten the west side of the shed.
Nailed in place, a badger skull grins.
Three, five and seven point racks
weather in the light to the color of salt.
Jawbones like lopsided boomerangs
gnaw the wood whenever the wind blows.

Realize here lives our heritage
of uncles and fathers and sons
haphazardly decorating the rough plank,
our tribute to generations of game
brought down by generations of men.
Admire the magpies' ingenuity
at cleansing every morsel of gristle,
every speck of sinew and tendon
from the antlers' distorted tree
and the fierce arrangement of skulls.

Realize here lives only a fraction
of the legacy, the customary violence
which men hand down to younger men,
nothing here to illustrate the efficiency
of skewering salmon with a pitchfork
or even dynamiting them to the surface,
of blasting a bobcat off a power pole
with the neighbor's semi-automatic rifle,
of snaring mink or cottontails that screamed
until silenced, then skinned and stewed.

Realize looking upon this wall
is like reading of an ingenious tradition
etched in the grooves and hollows,
the dimples and sockets of every skull and bone,
in every fleck of paint and splinter of wood

or like browsing a museum from the beginning
when running the trap line was a gesture
of love between fathers and sons,
when a kill shot would determine
who was the better man.

MEMORY IS LIGHT THE COLOR OF NICKEL

For a drink, neighbors tell of witnessing light
from a blast worse than any they can remember
that threw a man all the way across his shop.
They thought it was crazy to braze that fuel drum,
to think he knew the ways of diesel and flame.

What I remember best is my father warning,
Now don't look at the light, though he must
have known I would itch to memorize
that voltage lunging between his hands
and charging the rod to bead and meld

something broken over time, that nickel light
trembling the shadow which loomed up behind him,
that welder humming like the hive pelted to a frenzy,
and the cold quality of acetylene reaffirming itself
deep within the angry buzz of my adolescence.

I sweat like a man hired the dog days of summer
to chop a cord of wood, and I try not to imagine
how the ghosts of the neighbor boys hovered above
the accident scene, unsure of whether to hold on
to the lives they once knew or follow the light.

YOUR LIFE AS FOUND IN A TOOLBOX

Everything necessary to maintain
every foundation ever built so far
is found simply by fondling the latch,
as easily as recalling an unfond past,
and then by handling each orderly tray
of tools too simple to call hand tools:
a stick of chalk meant for marking
the measure of almost anything
from concrete to an assortment
of planks sorted out as useless;
that yellow Stanley measuring tape
used to measure what used to matter;
and one lead stone to plumb the line,
much like a fisherman's sinker or fob,
and gauge the point of vanishing.

Dig much deeper to find those
lining the bottom that fit the hands
perfectly of any man who constructs
a reluctant living with his hands:
the square a clumsy boomerang
perfect at setting the record straight;
a claw hammer meant to hammer
whatever it can to your expectations,
then claw them apart on second thought;
and finally, ultimately, the spirit level
with its single, jaundiced eye
leveled expectantly in your direction
and rolling whenever you breathe,
the only bubble in the world
that won't burst at the slightest breath.

VISITATION FROM THE NORTH

It rests a paw heavy over your heart,
a sign, you think, of threat or affection.
It rests its jaw upon the other pillow
and growls premonitions of the north:

the brown trout found dead in pond ice,
a raccoon's hand gnawed from the trap.
It strokes your cheek with a tongue
like a slab of salmon, pink and reeking,

until you dream of plunging through
a weak spot in the snow's frozen crust
down into the ripe dark of an ancient den,
buried with this dream for all of winter.

Jarold Ramsey

SIGNAGE

On a Route 390 overpass
for all the northbound world to see
in yellow three-foot strokes
KERRY I LOVE YOU—MIKE
I love you both whatever happened
even if Kerry now takes another route
to work and Mike now rues his reckless artistry
hanging over the railing after midnight
painting his heart out upside down and backwards
the true posture of love

Elizabeth McLagan

THE TOURIST OF DESIRE

I will probably never be a whale, though I have
seen them mating (you may have too), perhaps on Sunday
nights, idly sipping wine and listening to music, one of
those pieces
for solo violin where Bach forgets his duty to God
and lets the violin follow its intemperate longing.

The T.V.'s mute and tuned to PBS, where it's always
Nature. Whales were cows once: imagine them
in the surf like a bunch of tourists, falling in love
with the sea, and here they are, two shadowed immensities
slurring the light, and a third thing like a dark rope

appearing between them. You wish you had popped in a blank
tape so you could savor the moment: it must have taken
hours, days of lurking under the whales,
salt sucking pores and the human breath breaking
against them to capture this uncoiling.

And in Prague at a monastery, books
stacked to the ceiling, the room roped off, you
can only gaze blankly at the ceiling fresco,
"The Struggle of Mankind to Know Real History,"
and of course you want to know it too. In a side aisle,

among shells and a desiccated turtle, the actual whalish thing:
a long unjointed arm narrowed to a thumb. Form follows
function, and you imagine the moment: how it hesitates,
caresses, then levers across the mountainous flesh
to find its little cave. Of course there's a sign (don't touch):

can't you see the girls like startled swans hurrying past
in clumps, the school boys smirking, what else
to do but long to look and touch and be held, armless in
blue water,

propelled by the long flex of the spine, why else does
the violin,
each stroke smoking with rosin, drive that music into
our veins?

Tom Hansen

NO LEAVES

This time I promise. Not even one
green on the tree or dead on the ground
or midway almost suspended in air,
though it is October and cold and so full of wind
the moon last night went to bed in the river,
and walking the dog this morning
in the leftover dark before daylight
I heard the cackling cry of the dead
with every blindfolded step.
But I have promised. Not one.

You are half my age and live in a country
I have been exiled from,
where it is summer (July, I think)
and the fierce sun beats down,
or where it is no season ever,
for weather is a religion I don't believe
you observe: the wind merely wind —
a joy, a nuisance — but never a messenger
sent to tell you what you are ready
at last to hear.

For now I give you the slant light of autumn:
gold beaten so fine
whatever it touches secretly shimmers.
It hangs in the air for one little moment,
forever October.

ELEGY: PRELUDES

ASHES, ASHES

Things fall out of the tv. Out of
the newspaper, the sugar bowl.
Figures rush from burning houses,

some without coats or shoes.
My mother's mouth craters with fear.
She grips the chair, her screams

undoing like rain in wind. No matter
that it's a calm spring afternoon,
that the only threats lie within her,

old woman with dementia in a blue chair
in California. The news from there
is the same: fear, ruin, the brain

running out on itself like someone
running from a burning house,
eyes already full of ash.

ROPE TOSS

My mother stares out the high windows.
Clouds menace, drag her toward
smoke water. *Watch out!* She grabs

for me like rope as I try to reassure her.
Her bad ear takes my words,
turns them inside-out, upside down,

looking for a fit. *Oh, she says, really?*
Imagine! Her old ruse for hiding
that the words are blurred.

But it's her only ruse.
Why do we keep holding hands?
Quavering. *Are we lost?*

LOST INVENTORY

Another day. Everything's on the bed,
the contents of her dresser, purse,
the old red wallet that she shakes:

They've stolen every bloomin' cent.
I tell her it's safer to keep
money in the bank, then begin

putting everything away. She peers
as if I'm their conspirator,
whispers into her hand.

NIGHT FOOD

I dream, needing to be where
night is not. *She has no profile*
says the one beside me in the boat.

No one known by land. Someone
who feeds me sweet milk,
sings through my skin.

THE SEVERING

When the dog brought the pig's head
from the farm across the street and dropped it
on the back walk, it was mid-summer, warm
even deep at night, so by dawn the flies
were already stirring their hard bodies
toward it. By the time I came out to shake
crumbs from the tablecloth, the head moved
like a live thing with their gorging.

The dog lay unroused by all the buzzing,
himself gorged on brain and blood.
I didn't scream. I draped the cloth
over the porch rail and went down
to squat beside the thing. I took a stick
from the lawn, poked a little, making

flies swirl up like smoke and settle back.
The dog watched through a barely open eye.

A stupid dog, who the week before had herded
the Hannos' cows onto the farmhouse porch,
then sat and barked as they clattered back
and forth, their blank eyes spinning wild.
I poked some more and saw a pig eye
missing. The cut-off veins and gristle
clotted over bones I didn't know enough
anatomy to name. I waited there

as if for revelation. Inside the house,
the man I claimed to love had finished
with his coffee. I heard the water rinse
his cup, heard the click that lit another
cigarette. Then nothing but the flies
moving like a heavy dream you know
you'll keep the feel of when you wake.
I touched the small red branches

of a vein high on my thigh, first sign
my legs were ageing. Sometimes his tongue
moved there, moved slowly there, in ragged
circles—like the flies I brushed at then in quick
revulsion, standing as I threw the stick,
dizzying just as he came down the steps.
What in hell, he said, and went to get a shovel.
That afternoon a downpour washed away the stain.

I could tell you I dreamed the severed head,
sign of what I knew I had to do. But it was real,
as real as all my lies there, where I lived
another dozen years, dreaming of another
life, one that wouldn't cut me off from what
I longed for. As if a life were not continuous
with longing. As if I'd ever stop those years
from meaning all they do beyond their severing.

WEIGHT

He was drawn by the fire.
He loved the word *molten*.
He didn't know what else to tell her.
There would be work, people wanted railings,
chairs, sconces. And there was power
in making it: *wrought* iron.

So he left every morning at dawn.
So much for their love-making then.
And at night he was too tired, or his hands
still too full of fire, he said.
She knew this was a way of saying
the other thing he couldn't say:
her body had become fearful to him.
It was perfectly normal, with its breasts and slits,
its curves. So it could be any woman's.
Could be his mother's?
How could he be sure of anything,
he said. The next week he began

to bring home little twists and turns
of iron, lay them on the table.
They'd make wonderful paperweights, she said
one night, but as usual put them
in an old tin in the pantry.
She had already begun to lie
beside him perfectly
still, like paper.

Oliver Rice

HOW ETHOLOGICAL ARE THESE PILASTERS

Oh, Rebecca, heavy lady in the midtown throng,
how nostalgic are these facades,
these turrets and these porticos.

Oh, Charlie, missing person on the museum steps,
heir to Georgian maxims and Romanesque wiles,
how artifactual are these fenestrations,
these flutings and these campaniles.

Oh, Sean and Yoko and Ed,
telecrew at the scene of the news,
upon whom the annals have devolved, rococo and baroque,
how documentary are these totems of glass and steel,
these coppered finials and these gilded domes.

Oh, Alicia, skipping rope in the indigent street,
receiver of fables, Ionian and Gothic and cubist,
how genealogical are these pediments,
these friezes of garlands and cupids,
these cornices and these balustrades.

Susan Blackwell Ramsey

POMEGRANATE

is what she told the painters
she wanted her dining room. Not cinnabar,
not cowardly salmon or high terra-cotta.
And they would go on trying till she got it.

Anyone buying into this neighborhood
should insist on a clause which stipulates
the seller must move five hundred miles away,
a ten year margin before she can return.

Instead, they move two blocks and monitor
what She is doing to My house.
Conversely, new owners hardly cross the threshold
before they lift a leg and mark it Mine

by stripping wallpaper, carpets, cabinet doors.
Interior decoration as aggression,
so administered and so received,
peeing in the granary, shitting upstream.

So now, two families later, probably
that dining room's declined to Whisper Beige,
Raw Linen, Oystershell, Almond or Sand.
Something understated, tasteful, safe.

Two painters quit, one of them in tears,
one went insane, one ran away, one died,
but for a while that room had walls the color
of the heart's impulse to hospitality.

Cheryl Penner

TREES

Trees have become empty of meaning and messages
Have given up their crusade for comfort
No longer bend down with offerings

Trees have forgotten how to measure the children

Trees are nearer than ever to the answer
Have quit opening their heavy coats to the disbelievers

Trees have forgotten your dreams
No longer refuse to lie down with their enemies

They can't recall the last time they gave birth
No longer ask to be told the story of oceans
Would rather not give their blessing

Trees tell themselves that meadows will always remember
Have stopped washing their hair in the rivers

Trees will no longer come back for you on the long quiet road
Will no longer hush their rustlings before the rain comes
Have given up waiting for the party to begin

Trees in their sadness tell the evening to get lost
Disguise their longing by showing off their trinkets

They no longer perfume your bed with their branches
Have lost faith in steady rain

They dream of sheets flapping in innocent breezes
Can't bring themselves to make peace with water
No longer cradle your aimless wanderings

Trees can't help but envy your undisturbed slumber
Have become clever, and lift up their dresses at a moment's notice

Trees and brooms are at yet another impasse

Trees are tired of propping up your nostalgia
Have become tongue-in-cheek regarding snowfall
Now see the sunrise as heavy handed

They no longer nod as you trip up the sidewalk
Have become simple-minded, bearing smooth lozenges rather
than peaches

Trees weep for other trees

Trees have removed their shoes at the door
Have bent over backwards on your behalf
Have used up their courage

Trees no longer remember what came before wind
Are ashamed to admit that they should have listened to the stars

Trees whisper all night of when to set sail

POLICY FOR LONELY HEARTS

Please advise us of your progress.

—State Farm Insurance

Dear Owner,
your house is in sad
need of repair. The porch railing
is missing teeth, and moss
grows bright green
from the shingles. Last year's leaves
sag the gutters. Please cut away
all branches that snag
visitors, the loopholes
of their eyes. Your hedges are unsightly,
lumpy cousins—we've noticed
cats and squirrels
avoid them. Also, winter promises
a nasty fall
on those front steps. We'd advise
that you take pains
and scrape encrusted eggs
from Halloweens long past
off the robin-blue walls. Remember,
your home is your castle. For coverage
to continue, you must
show more care. Plant a red garden.
Find a wife and spruce up
the place with children. We don't believe
there's time to spare. We don't believe
in time alone. The ladder
leaning forlornly in the eaves
depresses us. You are not yet
lost—see how the shells
of passing cars throw light
off your rattletrap windows?

THE LIST

Those five nickels from her husband:
each one minted in a different year —
the year they met, the year they married,
the good years which brought children —
what kind of a woman loses something like that?

Or loses the bleached-out bones of a seal —
a white rib, a skull — washed up on the sand
at Neah Bay, taken home for the mantel?
How could those just disappear?
The list grows to include the sound

of moving water, and to include precision,
for it is more precisely the sound of an ocean
which is lost, and then the taste of salt
on someone's lips as well as the sense
of who that someone was. Soon the list

fills a page, then pages: all the lost items
are somewhere. Or no place at all,
which is not where anything belongs.
And what kind of world is this, she wonders,
where everything we look for is gone?

COUNTING SONG

One sun. Two pillows on a bed.
Three children grown
and gone, their leaving left
four-seasons-in-a-row
in rows, left the table set
for years. *What do I do now?*
Five fingers made a hand. Forget
the body as a home,

forget the head. Instead,
count six beans sown,
The Dipper's seven stars, eight sad
dogs gnawing their own bones,
nine snakes coiling, ten skins shed.

Robert Grunst

Three Poems

FROM EVERLASTING TO EVERLASTING

—for Agnes Delacruz

Three layers of shingles, roof boards, beams
and stringers, plaster, faded draperies,
the red carpet from the sanctuary...
Agnes Delacruz the demolition crew loaded
your old church onto the backs of trucks.
Errant rosary beads, kneelers, water-warped
hymnals, cracked pews the antique dealers
would not buy are smoking in the county dump.
A *Caterpillar* tractor's standing by to turn
the heap and keep it burning. Who did you
pray for at the altar rail in your black dress?
A sister and three nieces living still
in Mexico; for hands from heaven to set
tassels to the corn of Oaxaca, for breath
to blow the pollen clouds row to row?
Did you pray for a longer green season,
yellow blossoms, fields going mad with pickles
for your son and his work: ten hour shifts,
seven days a week, all that overtime
for your torero astride his hi-lo charging
forks-full around blind corners of the biggest
pickle plant in the world? Movers wrapped
your blue Madonna in canvas, bore her
corpse-like to the heaven of the rectory
basement along with Saint Joseph, Saint
Francis de Sales, and the monsignor's

three illegal sets of studded tires. They snuffed
all your blue-glass vigil lights and scrapped
the iron stand. I think of your black shoes,
leather cut out in spots so you could
walk with dignity, so knots disfiguring
your feet could not interfere. Your black
veil. Choir practice in the loft. My lost
soprano voice. My looking down
on you. Someone must have died you loved.
Someone always has: has loved and loved
and wept. Someone sings and sings
to assuage sorrow. Voices crack. Grackles
go wild, attracted by infatuating glints
of color in this holy land of Michigan.
They swerve and smash through
stained glass, once-only wrecking balls
entering consecrated space with so little
preparation, with no time for surprise.
I will love you always, Agnes Delacruz.

YELLOW TUMBLERS

—*Hier gaan we dan.*

What we never figured out was how she climbed
Those steps, a stairway narrowly built,
Saving space below for sorting tulip bulbs
She sealed in sacks for September sales;
Space for an old Deere tractor, disk harrow,
Wagon, barrels filled with forks her workers
Used to turn up bulbs. At Tulip Time
Her fields were blocks of color. You paint
Them in. She loved more what happened
After heavy rains. All those heart-shaped petals
Dropped along the rows, blowzy streaks of red,
Yellow, magenta, spilled cream. That perfume
Reminded her of her Netherlands, she said.
The silo's wooden cap was falling in.
She came down with polio when she was eight.
Mornings when she'd hang her wash,

Reaching as she had to like a supplicant
Who clearly understands what she's done
Wrong, ours was the guilt of watching
Her in secret, lying in our bed.
After she pinned the last sheet,
Pillow case, or stocking, she'd disappear
Into the barn. In her absence, we lay waiting
For nineteen yellow tumblers.
Somehow she'd hoist herself up onto the floor
Above her bulbs, into ceremonious
Cooing, into a bowing congress of pigeons.
We said she must call first, *Here we go!*
In Dutch and pull a rope, springing
A trap door, setting her birds free.
And she'd watch them through her windows:
Diamonds cut out of boards below
The silo's ruined cap: All those otherwise
Good for nothing mica-winged
Pigeons, all the exotic crossings of tulips,
All the colors changing in her dreams, executing
Wild mid-flight somersaults, braking
Against nothing, performing lovely tucks
And vaults above her lots and rows. All that art,
All that purely extravagant breeding!

GOLDENROD GALLS

This afternoon the stars are burning as ever. As ever
it's a long climb. Who wouldn't love once to hear

the music of the elements, each absolute pitch, harmonies
defined by the din? Just now though I'll take these small

tokens: a downy woodpecker, a snowy field filled
with stalks of goldenrod, and the swellings on the stalks,

tumors really, outsides tanned and shellacked
against weather, insides filled with white placental cake

which swelled around the eggs of a parasitic fly. All of this
begins in summer. The flies prick open the new stems

and deposit their eggs. The eggs incubate at the centers
of the stems. The goldenrods' star-shaped flowers

turn their perennial gold. The eggs hatch. The larvae
fill with all the sweetness of the world. They orbit

around themselves in succulent darkness. There must be
still another music that downy woodpeckers hear.

Afternoons like this we see them flicking through the stands
of goldenrod, clinging to stems, taking surveys of galls,

servants to nothing but their own connoisseurship, the wintry
bouquets of galls, pipings and scratchings of fat grubs

eating cake soaked in milk, and the holes the woodpeckers
drill through to the chambers within are perfectly functional,

as is the downy's flight, as is the music of feathers:
such impeccable navigation, one golden gall to the next.

Tania Runyan

MY FATHER WANTS ME TO BUY A TELESCOPE

For his life has been lost
in time. What does sixty-three matter
when Jupiter storms for millennia?
In his backyard observatory nine states away,
black bins and tubes
swivel from the concrete
in slow supplication to the sky.
He knows his place among the stars
is small. Watching them
allows him infinity.

I told him, sure, I might like one
someday. Now his letters arrive
on the week, abounding with aperture,
T-rings and deep sky objects.
He forwards catalogs, prints online diagrams
of Dobs and refractors.
I cannot even identify
the North Star; I just heard
the red spot vanished
years ago. But I am halfway lost
in this sudden, strange force,
the madness that makes him
warn in a voice I never heard,
*Be patient, honey. Buying a scope
too quickly is expecting the universe
to give up its secrets easily.*

He used to shun mystery.
He used to down beer
while building miniature freight trains
that looped the garage endlessly.
When I was little, he left me
quiet in my room, but now
he cannot stop speaking

of my need for distant galaxies.
*Linger in astronomy stores.
Be recognized at the planetarium.
Get invited to star parties,*
where for hours they wait in silence
for the green fires of hidden
constellations to descend
through the trees.
And when I finally get a scope
of my own, I must not lug it
grudgingly from the closet
and demand the stars,
but assemble it with reverence
and wait for the darkness.
When the Lagoon Nebula
whirls in the eyepiece
like an electric sea, I will forget
the daily movements of my life.

It will be years
before I can afford one,
but I will stack his letters and catalogs
with reverence, hang the photo
of his stately pose by a giant
Schmidt-Cassegrain. I'll memorize
charts, rub shoulders, crash
star parties, stand in the dark.
I will wait
so I can tell him
what I see.

Valerie L. Egar

SIX POSTCARDS AND AN OBSERVATION

A Cairo evening. In the souk, flasks of perfumed oil.
White water lilies next to gutted fish. Overripe
peaches fill the air with a bloom of flies and sweet
rotting flesh. A dark man presses me, *Look! Look!*
At the rugs. At the scarabs. At the blind child at his feet.
Every phrase of Arabic is a locked question.

How you going to pay? is the question.
The car smokes at the side of a Jersey road. Oil
slicks the pavement. He leans on the truck, stares at his feet,
waits for an answer. I'm a stranger, stranded and ripe
for the taking. *Visa. Mastercard.* I open my wallet. *Look.*
He lowers the hook. The breeze from the marsh smells sweet.

Piano and trumpet swells spill into the street. *Sweet*
Jesus! Saturday night in Key West. Tonight, every question
is a question for tomorrow. The sax sounds fine. I look
through a cracked window. A girl dances. Her sweat is oil
of sandalwood. Every spin throws a trail of ripe
suggestion at her man's jitterbugging feet.

Malaise and the headache that comes from being 12,000 feet
above sea level. I sip tea made with *coca* leaves, sweet
with honey. Cuzco, Peru. *Inca stronghold... ripe...
silver... gold plundered... Pizarro.* Not one question
for the guide. I hear her words through a coil
of drugs and fatigue. But when I see the Quechua woman,
I look.

Drive through the Pine Ridge Reservation and look
at the fatal accident signs that line the highway. One
every few feet.
X marks the spot. The men drink wood alcohol,
anti-freeze, oil
of turpentine, and fly like eagles to meet a fleet

and bitter end. Sitting Bull died here. His brothers follow.
No question
though from the radio: In Bennett County, the wheat
is ripe.

I hesitate. Is it open? The girl has eyes of a child, but a
body ripe
with puberty. She is wiping tables and has not learned
the look
that invites. Her mother yells at her in Creole. The girl's
question
is halting, in English she practices with the nuns. *Will you
rest your feet?*
It is morning, too early for my feet to be tired but I sit, order
sweet
croissants, café au lait. Already the day is awash in sun and
tanning oil.

From the air, it's a different view. Oil refineries, lit like
amusement parks. Ripe
garbage barges skimming sweet water like bugs. People
disappear. I look
at an abstract 30,000 feet below and like the angels,
haven't a question.

HORUS NON NUMERO NISI SERENAS

Most sundials are flat discs
with a prong sticking out,
a gnomon, a shadow-caster
at any given moment
preventing that moment
from seeing the sun.

Most suns are spherical gaseous
flame-storms in whose light
the sundial is obliged to teach
by darkness, and whose heat
prevents close argument.

Most arguments, like most sundials,
stick up for themselves.
Otherwise, where would they be?
Most are circular:
hop in anytime. Hop in anywhere.

THE WAY THAT YOU SAY IT

"Too smooth," she says,
speaking of the chicken sausage,
how it's ground too fine—
a good sausage ought to have
some variation in it,
some coarseness of texture—

but I think for a moment
she means something else:
the waiter, the wine, both
syrupy, the music
oozing out of concealment
in the ceiling, the marriage;

amazing how many
nouns come swarming
like kids to the ice-cream truck
at the sound of a single
attractive adjective.
But she wouldn't just let it
slide out like that: she'd

put a pause in,
a hesitation. She'd be at
more pains to show me
how the words have awkward,
uncomfortable edges. How they could
catch in a person's throat—

WHILE YOU WAIT

A new book's always
coming out as if
last week's won't
work now. About
how to breathe. About
cats. Insatiable
appetites you might say
but what other kinds
are there? Or should be.
Or obsolescence. As if as
soon as it's in
print it begins
degrading: true. That
telephone books appear
no more than yearly's
merely an artifact
of reproduction
Ditto the dictionary.
A stricture electronic
listings are not
subject to. Where
formerly, delete one

name from a page
or add one and it's
cut and paste; four
names in sequence,
bang goes the book.
The brain can open
room up and close
space as fast as
thought or better:
without thought. Almost
so too the processor.
Being nonmechanical.
No stones, no trees.
No changes to breathing
or cats have occurred
in recorded memory,
only approaches to,
the writing down of,
codification. Which
itself promotes.
Unwritten laws last
best. Write it, regret it.
Regret it, revise it.
Give baby a name.
Relax, my wife says.
I *am* relaxed. Like the cat:
just look at him. Don't touch.

Robert Bense

CHEROKEE REMOVAL

Rattle of broken milkweed pods.
Frosted squash vines.
Soldiers rasping hands
over fire. Tamped earth,
red dust silting the pine.
A nation taken prisoner.
Five tribes stockaded. In the cold
cattle and horses stiffening.
Soldiers in the rearguard
torching house and barn.
Timbers sparking high
in the night sky. Lame horses.
A partial trust in the upturned
faces of oxen.
Dogs in a sniff hunting
food. Fighting off buzzards
along the trail. The dying
and the dead dropped off,
wrapped in blankets.
Soldiers riding escort.
The living will walk
a thousand miles, marched
to the river, and Green's Ferry.
To the slow beginning west.
Ice hanging in the trees.
A girl who was three years old—
writing in a book of remembrances
at Cape Girardeau *I cried
only once I think. They took
my father. How to forget,
I'm almost the last.*
Winter of 1838 swallowed
in the hugeness of America.
Blind gut of the river.
The river remembers nothing.

Molly Tenenbaum

WHAT THE PSYCHIC SAID

This is not your era.
You are kneeling in a garden.
Yet, you've more to learn from him.
In the doorway of a house you stand, not rich or poor.
Solitude blurs edges, I can't see
if someone else is there.

This is not your era, that's why
you can't find a job.
Behind waving grapevines, foreground dazed
with roses, your shirt's work-blue
slivers up and down, the lush closing over.
You grow wider in empathy, straighter in reason,
but these are not your true directions.
Gold rooms and dim ones parquet the house,
and far, through the honey of dust-crusting windows,
skyscrapers sway, silver horses.
Say he never came back. Would you still
love to be alone?

You should have lived in the 30s, 40s, I'm not sure, but back
when women could do what they wanted when no one was looking.
Now everyone looks all the time.
The job was to boil summer jam.
The job was to gather windfalling walnuts, fruit and hips
like breaking coins around you.
What if you stopped naming difference, he's this, you're that —
oh, I see, difference weaves a willow fence
your solitude grazes in, nibbling grass from the hedges.
Were you to pass through an illness, sheets flat
as if no thickness lay under them, suddenly
you'd know what you loved.
Afternoon blinding the house,
east wall, west wall, corner to corner.
Where are you going, putting on your shoes? Why take your coat

from the entry closet and button it up? He gave you
a pin of kissing faces molded together, glowing on the collar.
You must be either completely alone or wholly one with another.

White smudgy bloom on purple grapes, the drizzling roses.
If you are a moon and empathy is light,
how full before you break?
In the house, the sun spools everywhere, and you could sit
in one place forever, no hours passing.
Money is irrelevant, and this is why the day
you enter, house-door pressed shut behind you,
feels abstract, lines drawn with straight-edge, protractor.
Except your high school geometry teacher
said *steakmeat* and *raisin* for *statement* and *reason*,
so your answers taste like mince.
Solitude is a castle — whether you're rinsing
the dishes or kissing your love, always you walk
on the ramparts, eyes brushed by night's rushing wings.

You belong where you can step
from the house in your bathrobe, ripening
grapes at your cheek, roses
in lullabies soft at your shoulder.
A figure stands by you, the shape of a man,
but you see grass through him,
he has never grown real, and this
is your lifelong sorrow.
You cannot sit anywhere for long, time simmering
sunsets in shatters. God's roiling voice
boomed down *Buy a ticket*
to the man crying *Why can't I win?*, but you, at a table, you make
your own ticket, a painting of everything: borders, thicketts,
bluebells, oaks, ponds, oxbows, lips, elbows,
dangles, triangles, Jack-in-the-pulpit, love-in-a-mist,
Orion, the Pleiades, Oregon, Piper Creek watershed,
kitchen shelves,
mugs, and two yolk-yellow egg-cups. If I asked you
right now,
what would you say is your deepest pleasure?
A funnel of late orange light glows around you, and
no one else is there.

Karen Glenn

NIGHT FISHING

Lantern scans, a searchlight
over water. My father and I
are floundering. I am twelve.
He's just returned from war games
in Japan. We walk
in Neuse River water, metal gigs
in hand, searching for the tell-tale shapes
of flounder. For camouflage, they bury
themselves in sand. Still
their outlines give these fish away,
like a girl's small breasts
against an outgrown sweater.

I feel lost. He's been gone
two years, is as strange to me
as the metal poles we carry,
poles designed to stab.

The wind is hot. The stars
outline the sky in constellations.
I am afraid. I don't want
to find the fish. I would not have the heart
to lift the gig. I scuff
through water, stirring sand.

My father sees. He starts
to sing. He kicks up
sand like I do. He takes
my hand. We splash, we shuffle
through the swirling water.

The fish are safe. And I am safe.
The moon shines. The lantern shines.
The water shines. My father and I
are going home.

Chris Dahl

THE GOVERNING BODY

Tonight the Chinese emperor will sleep
with the 47th concubine. The night after,
the 54th.

Two court ladies
trail bushes through special red ink
and frown over their task of scheduling.
There is magic to consider,
pregnancies, the monthly bleeding
and the compounding of the yin essence
through the proper ratio (concubine
to 3rd wife, 2nd, consort)
required for the emperor
to honor the empress
on this month's most
auspicious day.

The emperor broods over the silence
of the general he's sent to Ha-rien
to suppress the uprising.
Two eunuchs in his bedchamber shake out
the straw matting and arrange
silk covers. Entering her bath
the 47th concubine dreams
she will please the emperor, will be favored.
She pinches
her crooked tooth
between her knuckle and thumb. No matter
how often she tries, it will not twist straight.
Still, she is almost beautiful, her hair
ruffling about her face
with the awkwardness of a young crow.
One of the lucky ones
she has already slept with the emperor
once this year. She was a virgin then,
a young girl just sent

from the newly conquered Northern province.
Since, she has studied
the manual of various positions, kisses.
She wonders if she'll be brave enough
to try the butterfly caress
on the emperor's male member.

The emperor rubs at his eyes with the palms of his hands.
He would like to sleep.
But he must see to this border agreement
with the northern horse people. And decide
what to send the King
of the southern peninsula in return
for the royal elephant.
And he really must send a runner
to chastise his general (why
is there no word?).
And discuss with the feng-shui expert
the proper siting for his burial tomb.

The younger of the eunuchs lays out
the sleeping robe while the elder,
with great difficulty, pees
through a quill. The younger runs his hands
over intimate stitches.
Seventeen women
and half a year's time to suggest
the subtle passage of dragons
from faded earth to the deeper blue heaven
of the emperor's shoulders.

The 47th concubine rises and extends her right hand.
She receives a silver ring
to wear into the bedchamber. Tomorrow
it will be moved to her left hand.
If she conceives, she may replace it
with gold. She could give birth
to the next emperor!

The emperor sighs and walks toward the far room

leaving the candle flickering.
The young eunuch opens carefully the small box
where he keeps his most
precious treasure: the dried buttons
of his testicles and penis. He satisfies himself
he will be buried as
a whole man.
In Ha-rien the general has been slaughtered
and the army retreats.
The 47th concubine steps into an empty corridor
on her way to climb
a vermilion staircase.

The red-stained brushes schedule
the 12th day following the next full moon
for the 3rd wife of the 2nd rank.

About Our Contributors

JOHN BENSKO teaches at the University of Memphis. The University of Massachusetts Press published his *The Waterman's Children* in 1994.

ROBERT HERSHON lives in Brooklyn and edits *Hanging Loose*. His latest book of poems is *The German Lunatic* (Hanging Loose Press, 1999).

MARK KRAUSHAAR lives in Madison, Wisconsin.

BRUCE BOND directs the Creative Writing Program at the University of North Texas and is the poetry editor of *American Literary Review*. BOA Editions published his *Radiography* in 1997.

ALLEN BRADEN lives in Puyallup, Washington.

JAROLD RAMSEY lives in Rochester, New York. His most recent book is *Hand-Shadows* (Quarterly Review of Literature, 1989).

ELIZABETH MCLAGAN teaches at an alternative high school in Portland, Oregon.

TOM HANSEN teaches at Northern State University in Aberdeen, South Dakota.

LYNNE KNIGHT lives in Berkeley, California. Her first book was *Dissolving Borders* (Quarterly Review of Literature, 1996).

OLIVER RICE lives in Naples, Florida. He is a former program director for the Peace Corps and the Ford Foundation.

SUSAN BLACKWELL RAMSEY works as a bookseller in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

CHERYL PENNER lives in Seattle.

ERIN MALONE has moved recently from Colorado Springs to Seattle.

JULIE LARIOS is a graduate student in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Washington.

ROBERT GRUNST teaches at the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Minnesota. Western Michigan University's New Issues Press has just published his *The Smallest Bird in North America*.

TANIA RUNYAN lives in Northbrook, Illinois.

VALERIE L. EGAR is studying screenwriting at The New School in New York City. She lives in Titusville, New Jersey.

BOB BROOKS lives in Concord, Massachusetts.

ROBERT BENSE lives in Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

MOLLY TENENBAUM teaches at North Seattle Community College. Her *By a Thread* will be published soon by Van West & Company.

KAREN GLENN lives in New York City.

CHRIS DAHL lives in Olympia, Washington. Stillwaters Press published her chapbook *Mrs. Dahl in the Season of Cub Scouts*.

WE NEED YOUR HELP

Poetry Northwest is in its fortieth year of uninterrupted publication. Unlike a distressingly large number of American literary magazines, it has not disappeared, altered its format, or curtailed its quarterly appearances under the stress of increased printing costs and higher postal rates. It continues to publish the best poetry it can find. The University of Washington is supporting it to the limit of present resources, but in spite of our increased circulation and a recent increase in our subscription price, there remains a substantial gap between our income and our expenses. Our readers have helped generously in the past. Their contributions have kept us going. Won't you please join them? Gifts to *Poetry Northwest* are tax deductible.

For the sake of our bookkeeping, if you are making a contribution to the magazine and at the same time are renewing your subscription or subscribing for the first time, would you please make out separate checks? Thank you.

David Wagoner
Editor

