Cover from a photo of a young elephant

Photo by Robin Seyfried

POETRY NORTHWEST AUTUMN 2000 VOLUME XL1, NUMBER 3

Published quarterly by the University of Washington, A101 Padelford, Box 354330, Seattle, WA 98195-4330. Subscriptions and manuscripts should be sent to Poetry Northwest, Department of English, Box 354330, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195-4330. Not responsible for unsolicited manuscripts; all submissions must be accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope. Subscription rates: U.S., $15.00 per year; single copies $5.00. Foreign and Canadian, $17.00 (U.S.) per year; single copies $5.50 (U.S.).

Periodicals postage paid at Seattle, Washington.
Postmaster: Send address changes to Poetry Northwest, Box 354330, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195-4330
Published by the University of Washington
ISSN: 0032-2113

POETRY NORTHWEST

VOLUME FORTY-ONE
NUMBER THREE
AUTUMN 2000

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Robert Hicok

**INSOMNIA DIARY**

At 5 a.m. light from their living room sinks fluorescent teeth into powder dropped from the grey womb of clouds already moving to Cleveland, pregnant with snowmen.

I'm a voyeur in the sense that I float through the window of a bungalow as parents take turns holding the scream of their son.

I've seen the thorn of his voice contort his body. Seen his mother's lips form sounds of comfort, her only medicine. Seen the man pace when not holding the child and the woman pace when not holding the child and both pace with the child.

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**Are You Moving?**

If you wish to continue receiving your subscription copies of POETRY NORTHWEST, be sure to notify this office in advance. Send both your old address and new—and the ZIP Code numbers.
in their arms, small miles of asking their flesh to heal a stubborn pain.

We've been together since one a.m. This is more intimate than watching sex, which may be a confession: This is more personal than my tongue's opinion of saffron. And though it's not the dream in which my left hand leaves for a better gardener, in which I stand above myself and pet my eyes, wanting back in, it suggests the dream: a feeling that each life is separated from a life, that each shadow has ambitions to cast its own shadow.

Or just now, how both parents made a cave around their child, reaching across, reaching through each other until there was one body, and how it felt wrong to stare, almost

pornographic to see the hunger of a soul to encounter the nearest thing to itself.

SEVENTEEN FIRES

On Ganymede looking back at the sun you would see one yellow-orange rose floating in the sky like the seventeen that live on my kitchen table. Or when you fill the tub and lean your head over the cool white skin and keep it under water until the time of hallucinations, maybe then the bright idea of their flesh would appear and confuse the holier parts of your thinking, thus begins your path to sainthood, your first vision of Christ the Immaculate Flower.

It's easier for me, I own the pitcher from which they drink their last meal, seventeen fires like the unemployed concoct in barrels and circle during winters of no food, seventeen mouths lipsticked red and hips guarded by the slightest summer dress, seventeen apologies of the earth for the supper it plans to make of me.

In the act of being human everything is more attractive than being human. For instance the certainty of rocks that where they are is where they belong, or the duty of clouds to change their minds, or the slime trail left by slugs, which they don't clean up
or explain as a stage they have to go through
to get to that place they need to be
to become the best slug they can be.
My slime trail looks better when decorated
by roses, this is all I ask
of the shopping center, the nursery,
of the entire industry of beauty.
I don't want rouge
or high-gloss paint for my car,
new shoes that resemble the wings
of cormorants in flight, a fedora
the Dalai Lama would trade his robes and beatitude for.
I am allowed seventeen flags from paradise.
I am allowed a day off work
to sniff the garden invading my kitchen.
I am allowed to think a woman
split the bones of ten thousand roses
and mixed their secrets,
and when blooms of mere beauty, when blooms
of simple radiance approached,
cut her finger, cut her tongue,
cut her mind
and spilled to the green mix her wish
for a species
called Explosion of Mercy, called
May the River Follow You Home,
called The Only Breath You Need Take.
And if I keep them long
after they’re dead, when the water stinks,
when the leaves have turned to worms,
I’ll call you and hold the phone
to what they say to the breeze,
the brittle ticking resembling the things
I repeat to the dark,
that I feed to the ear beside me in bed
I know is sleeping,
the woman who’ll wake tomorrow
and report the keening of an impossible dream.

Martha Silano

ALL THINGS WANT TO FLOAT

When their strings finally snap, paper kites resist the urge
to land in wires, on roofs, in the tops of maples and oaks.

When spindles and whelks sway in the shallows,
they don't desire in the least to be picked up,

buffed, placed in rows beneath glass. In truth,
they'd prefer to flounder forever in the hissing tide.

Knowing full well the science of sun and dew,
a spider casts her strand between two bushes.

When, at dawn, a human unwittingly passes through,
she dangles (cautiously, proudly) from her weightless arc
of stars. Cottonwood’s fluff, thistle’s pappus, lint confined
to the dryer; all long to hitch a ride to Andromeda.

Not even a thing’s heaviness exempts it, as logs,
tethered to flat-beds, unleash, sniff out fluid routes,
as boats, big as houses, loosen from moorings.
Good thing our brains are buoyant, bathed
in a cranial sea. Good thing, when at last we concede
to gravity, the scent of decay entices the swatted,

the often shooed away. Good thing, though preferring
to flit and bungle without us, they take us, hungrily, in.
DEFINE MEDICAL TERMINOLOGY AND CONDITIONS
ASSOCIATED WITH CONCEPTION

let's just say right now it's a wonder sperm & egg found a way
to fuse it all
that godforsakenly cold and drizzly day
gravely jerky mud-puddled rutted all-too-jolting ride
icy bike seat jutting my miracled mound
for anything close to fertilization
lull and bob of a zygote (23 his, 23 mine)
though I must admit I never understood
Miss Barbieri's oogenesis
which sounded more
like someone about to come
than formation of a haploid ovum
which it was

Normally Tiger Mountain's the rising trills of orange-crowned warblers
yellow-rump's quick-witted whirs
Pacific Slope's eeeoooot!
but today except for occasional winter wren bursts
it's silent

Fitting perhaps
silence lichen-drenched
allowing a chance to take it all in
this bumpy gelid finger-numbing ride
this steep slog up loose rock
every-which-way rain
ruts slicks big sticks old snow
where it looks and feels
like maybe March
no sign at all of gooseberry's
fuchsia-starred tips
not even the leaves of Trillium...

Had to stop
near the top

push to a flattish spot
hop on

My guess?
In that pause
half in the clouds
half not
green shoots not yet dangling
bleeding hearts
in the late-spring mist
on persistent sperm
a hundred million conflreres weakening
the egg's insistent lock
pushed like a coho
sniffing home
from a thousand miles

From here it hardly seems conceivable
not only the hostile environment
elevation makes
but the one I've made
twenty years internally
diaphragm & spermicide
dependable dauntless intruders
on any sperm or egg's design

Today's a first in fact
so I'm extra carefully tasting
when we reach the top
my husband's salty cheeks tongue lips
50 degrees warmer
than my hands
which hold his head
not forgetting to mention
we've beaten (again)
the odds...
TRAVELER'S LAMENT

Should we have stayed at home and dreamed of here?
Where should we be today?—Elizabeth Bishop

I miss the man who sells wine, suggests
the Covey Run,

Rainbow Grocery’s neon orange tennis ball
tangerine stacks.

I miss the flower shop with its bundles of African Daisies,
Queen Anne’s Lace.

I miss our street, gossamer blossoms stuck like unlucky insects
to windshields, headlights.

I even miss the neighbor’s pick-up turning over, at six am,
like twenty Hoovers and a leaf blower,

clang of dumpster lid. Futility of sweeping sunflower hulls
from the walk,

the mailman bringing (politely, almost daily) more and more
of nothing.

I miss lugging the trash to the curb in a robe
about to slip open.

The hot water tank we easily empty
each time we make love in the tub.

PREDICTIONS, ADVICE, HOW-TO’S, ETC.
CONCERNING THE NOT-EVEN-REALLY-CONSIDERED-WORTH-TALKING-WRITING-OR-
FRETTING-ABOUT—TILL-AROUND-1997 MILLENNIUM

It’ll be like looking at the sky for the first time,
glimpsing bodies
too bright to be stars. It will remind you of the day you first
unraveled the mystery

of tugging poles—magnetic versus true. You will want to
call the line you’ve crossed
ecliptic. You will fully believe in the zenith, all things
cataclysmic & dire.

Expect unprecedented magnitudes. Horse-head clouds
refusing their bridles;
defunct comets crashing through barns. The naked eye
will scintillate—scantily, diaphanously clad. Spica will
pick up speed,
add a stud to the belt of Orion. Sirius & Procyon will
howl and howl.

You will be looking way over your head. If you look a
little farther
you’ll see day following night like an empty stomach
an Asteroid—

Encrusted, Crab-Nebula-Stuffed Omelet. Till then, network
with the stars. Rub elbows with their inner lives, but beware
of the loosely wound.

Head for the central bar & order something very Ursa
Major. Pass
on the globular clusters. Don’t wink back at the Dumbell
Nebula—he’s very low-power.
If you’re crumping out, check into The Whirlpool Galaxy (one floor below Mercury’s Organza). On the other hand, if you’re full-throttle there’s plenty to choose from—Gravitational Nudges at Green Flash, double John Bortles at Comet West, or the trendiest: Astrogram Cams at Saturn Montage. It’s the perfect night to pop the question, or even better, tie the knot.

Situate yourself near a solar wind as it shines through a valley’s edge, producing, in a sudden burst of total eclipse, a 2.2 carat diamond. Cap it off with a stroll to the Lick Observatory or the Jet Propulsion Lab.

It’s time to decide on a silhouette. The supernova-studded, slipper satin sheath astutely fits this be-all/end-all, cork popping romp, while the Little-Dippered princess conveniently stows in your crushed velvet overnight cachet. Whichever you choose, pack along several bolts of chiffon & some Peau de Soie in case of solar winds or a blackout. And while we’re filling trousseaux, don’t forget Altoids, Band-Aids, a pair of hose & at least a couple cans of not only refries but ready-to-eat-in-a-pinch French-cut beans or asparagus tips.

Call Grand Illusion & ask for an Appenine Scarp—46 dollars for the smooth, rolling nature of mountains, plus a strip of coalesced islands at no extra cost.

There’ll be hobnobbing, a leonine roar of cornhusking, excessive taffeta rustling, an overabundance of ebullient tête à têtes. Ten volcanoes will simultaneously erupt. The Astronomical Almanac predicts excellent views of a kinky gas tail & four new celestials succumbing to an irresistible urge. Once in orbit, we will call them Obscure Ground Mantid, Tomentose Burying Beetle, Wandering Spider, & If We Could Sell It We Would.

It will never be safe to observe the hole in the ozone with a fully outfitted scientist, exponential growth with a Malthusian-savvy deer mouse, or the sun with the naked eye, so rotate your telescope 180 degrees. Everything will be fine.
NANCE VAN WINKEL

MY SISTER'S FRIEND

Didn't like funerals. Wouldn't come. Instead brought my mother and my sister's boy a cake. Stood in the kitchen, telling how, what with the ice storm and power outage, she only hoped the cake was done for real. Her fuchsia lipstick. She and my sister speaking Spanish years ago on the phone. Giggling, far-gone in a south-of-the-border otherness. Weeks yet before the girl's father sat down in a plain, straight-backed chair in his tool shed. Quick sun-drop and his single shot of gunfire.

The quiet in our house—thin shadow of the quiet in theirs. My sister whispering on the phone in Spanish, something about travel to sunny Barcelona on a bus. Saying it again, slower. Her eyes welling up and catching mine across the kitchen. Then saying it in English. Test. Tomorrow. Last one of junior year.

Twenty winters later, the tilted shed is all that's left up there, where cows graze by TV signal towers. I drive by it every week: lost doors, blown windows, a slump of lumber beside the Black Angus.

And the tall, pink-lipped woman taking both my hands in the grocery store. The cake was good, I tell her. Delicious. In the cart, her little girl crying when she sees us cry. Aisle six of Safeway. Her mother repeating the story of hours of ice. The child's face dripping and her loud sobs almost obliterating the recipe for frosting: how rich and dark, and so easy, you can do it with your eyes closed.

SHERYL LUNA

THE CORDOVA BRIDGE

I'm not writing delicate silver birds or some Southwest aubade. I am rough in a pebbled & stickered dead sea. And here, crazy-sad among the flowerless places
I sweat my way through the dirge of horns & radio blues. Smog-filled air. Sweaty dark-dirty children hang on my car. Their paper cups hold out a coinless surrender. El Paso's call them scam-gangs. Bumper to bumper as a rainbow smears the sky. Window-washers beg for dimes. The streets narrow in Juarez. Gaudy green hand-painted school buses block signs. The poor wait. A bright scholar described los ciudades hermanos as unmoving. Blue hills, the river's banks deceiving us to see one-sided, blind. Juarez, me later driving in circles, cursing the mad stops, the move-over hurriedness. El Paso's streets are wide, people erect chain-link fences, bars over windows. They love their small plots of land, their jalopy cars. A poet once sang a maid's daily dread over Cordova. I think I see her sweating away. I once drew a breath of lush serenity, words danced as small breaths, gilded beads. But you see, I was cursed in this dust, crystallized among charcoal frown & smiles.

At times, anger is an unnamed cry. Must one sing lichen, lagoons, a glint of sky, creamy white breasts? Here, men & women living bare dance among crumbling things. A man without a leg has hopped that bridge for 30 years eyeing shiny red Firebirds. What was a bird of red-fire to him?

Do we all rise Phoenix from our tumbleweeds? Rainwash twirls about brown knees. Rolled-jeans, bare-feet. Popsicle-sellers close tiny carts, cigarettes boys cover damp cartons. And I am dry as an American can be.
mourn in the fields. She's breathing thin now, her veins too thick, her bones hollow, her left eye glaucoma-silver. A bedroom mirror covered with pictures, my own ten-year-old American face rosy and cheered. She tells me, "I'm ready to die." Her favorite song "La Puerta Negra." — The Black Door.

"You've gotta be strong in this life— mi jita." Here, I am, singing the unsung positive capability of the desert, how weeds grow orange wildflowers.

HER BACK, MY BRIDGE

Was it beauty— a house built of Tide-boxes in Juarez, orange and blue against the desert winter, where her family lived? Little Chiuhita sits on the U.S. bridge of entry.

She sat blush-cheeked, straight-backed & beautiful, thin-waisted & tearless at the window when she first came. A crumbling brick sill beneath small elbows. Brown eyes

glistening, wishing to receive dresses, jewels from American GI's. The street below smelling of dead things, outhouses. Her flowered red-green dress, her panty hose rolled over bony knees. As a girl

she could dance, she'd scrub the poverty with Ajax to find peace. She stuffed her cheeks with Mexican food—Las tinas, big vats of pintos, rice. Riding the Santa Fe boxcars to pick onions

in fields. Thirteen siblings screaming, sleeping. She was broken early by a boy. Found herself on red knees, taken in an alley. And the tears—did they come? Her eyes forever worried

by the sun. Has she seen trees sway wind, were clouds & sky ever blue-green? Could she kill that boy, now a man, with a cast-iron pan? Chiuhita's buildings red & gray

beneath the loneliest polluted sun. She's too old to clean now. The state's ladies come twice a week to scrub her frail back. They won't scratch

her back hard enough, won't dance her age away. She's pissed. Wrestling's her favorite thing, "Picale, Picale," she screams poking the tv screen

with a pencil. Her shoes once rubbed her ankles raw, yet she'd sway & sing—her voice a dove's call—Jesus, Jesus. She told me one spring of the dove's hopeful

Richard Robbins

THE WOMEN OF LOCKERBIE

After the explosion and the hail of fire and linen, after hot steel cooled on the ground, they buried each neighbor or son, undertook the terrible

reunion that began with quiet heaps of traveler's clothing left on each stoop by the coroner. In their own kitchens they picked bits of hair, bone from the slope

of a shoulder yoke, they bleached out soot, perfume of fear, their tired Scottish dirt before they washed the clothes for a last time, dried them on a line in west wind, brought

each thing back inside for the pressing, the folding, the packing in tissue before all was sent back in parcels marked for shipping to the grieved ends of earth.
Cameron K. Gearen

AFFIDAVIT

Later, when they question me, when they ask, why did you leave your car in the Shoe Carnival parking lot and walk down the highway carrying your new orange sandals in a plastic bag? I'll explain. How the car was trapped by red K-mart carts on all sides, how the effort to move them seemed enormous. And if I did move them, then what?

Everyone passes pedestrians. I could squat on my haunches in front of Winchell's Donuts just because I'm winded. If the shoulder gave out, I could tramp the grass. If an ambulance blasted by, I could stay ambulatory, send prayers in its wake rather than curse emergency's obstruction.

If it were wintry, I could watch ice melt and drip tunnels into someone's snowy yard. It's not wintry. I could stop in the cemetery, nap hours on a grave. Who would notice? Traffic lights would twinkle. I don't want my car with its rattles, its mud-caked floor, its bevy of insects trapped dead and burning in the back window. The car needs washing, waxing, drying. It wants to be vacuumed and lubed. And I'm done, see? Walking south down the highway. If the bag of shoes bangs against my calves, I'll leave it behind. Three days' walk to Louisville. Before that, Bedford, French Lick, the West Baden resort perched over hot mineral springs.

If that's where they find me, neck-deep in restorative waters, I'll have to explain that too. They'll say, Submit an affidavit. Then: I left my car in the parking lot because ____________________.

I chose the hot springs as my destination because ____________________.

How to make them see the whole slowed-down world, yellow-dotted line not the lane's demarcation but paint flecking asphalt, apprehensible?
UNDER SILVER LAKE

The part of me with feet walked the town's arteries last night. Graveyards, freight yards, yards spun of tulle, strung with clothesline, ringed in compost, peopled by rabbits.

At the factory, closed since May, swing shift ghost cars. All the fire escapes reached hopefully toward locked doors.

When I got to the lake, I became a canoe poled through dreck, until I verged on the dam.

Even the deer slept. I never left my bed. Believe: my knees, tucked behind my husband's, did not twitch.

Chest to back. Pelvis. Tethered by quilts, his even breath, the part of me with arms slept. And believe: it was no dream. Steams, the lake, in daylight. I look for prints, my own.

Strange picnic table, trail I've never climbed. But I recognize water churned by goose feet, throttled by lilies, fringed in reeds. The part of me with eyes ventures near the shore.

I am a polished shell. There are chambers in my body submerged so long they won't soon dry.

OUT FOR BREAKFAST

I know how to slit a cicada shell clean down its back and crawl out from the inside, pincers' husks still clamped in apple bark. Know, too, how to hold my orange beak open for air like the cardinal's on her nest. I am schooled in the apprenticeship of deer. All useful skills, to be sure, but deadly quiet. I fear the self invisible to the self, the way a brown moth might fool itself into thinking it is the brown leaf it lights on. People live in Louisville, Ohio River's southern shore, and we're a social lot. Likely even to love our jailers in a pinch. I watch a woman feed coins into a meter on Ormsby Street: my own fingers flare to life, my wrist rotates in its joint. A man at a bus stop: so this is how a human knee bends, how a person waits. I have eyes when the waitress looks into mine, a mouth when she says, What'll it be, hon? Me and my hash browns. These legs—midge-bitten, branch-scratched—might be real. I dreamed I was the cliff I fell from.

Near the bathroom, pierced boy, half my age, says, How ya doin', Girle? Brazen, these southern boys: scalps worried by bottle-black spikes, thin arms sheathed in denim. What does he see? A woman at a table, books her camouflage. As if he knows what this flimsy skin covers.
POSITION AVAILABLE: CONDORS. EMPLOYEE BENEFITS. ENJOY THE GREAT OUTDOORS

The important thing is effort.
No one’s ever seen one, so they’ve formed fantastic notions in their minds:

mythological vultures, horizon-sized shadows with keen, wise eyes, are you with me?
You’ve gotta don this motorized costume,

and be what they want.
Say some dope throws bread crumbs; go eat ‘em.
Give ‘em a gander at that wingspan. Profile

the beak. See this cable-ring? Pull it; it flexes the claws.
Quite right, “talons.” I can tell

You’re gonna be perfect for this job.
A real natural.
I’ll start you on the Santa Monica route...

soar past the airport,
fascinate tourists on the 3rd Ave. promenade.
Oh, yeah. You’ll impress ‘em to smithereens:

the envy of vacation slides
from Tuscaloosa to Japan,
their bald, feathered show-stopper, Baby,

and when you’ve gotten the hang of your wings, then migrate south;
we’re arranging to mate you at the San Diego Zoo.

In fact, you just missed who you’ll be with.
What a Gorgeous! She’d spotted our flyer
by a roller blade rental

and zeroed in straight from the beach.

Thank God chicks aren’t endangered.

Lemme see you perch on that billboard there.

EVERYONE’S JUMPING TO MISS LAVAY’S SWING BAND,

turning their bodies into pyrotechnic flags.
The sun goes—they don’t notice, don’t notice the moon—they’re in their own orbits. No one but me looks up
to see the clouds like wild black saxophones

or sees the beautiful woman, alone, eight feet away.
What will happen? Will the sky splash to pieces?
Will I stand still and be drenched? stay here while the crowd runs for cover, suddenly

beside her, suddenly holding her in the rain, nothing before me but her face, her mouth,
her wet dress sticking, sparks arcing from the stage lights, then all at once: dark? Not likely. This is not that story.

In this one, the storm blows uselessly north, just solos away. Her man returns with two cups of wine.
The band winds down their encore.
And I walk off, taking the longest street I can find.
LUNCH WITH LIZZIE AND DINNER WITH DONNA

1. Elizabeth and I like it when people say they can tell we’re father and daughter because of the strong resemblance since, technically, she is the daughter of my first wife by a still earlier marriage out in San Francisco and her biological father is a tall silent man from Oklahoma. When this happens Lizzie gives me a Sly Look from the corner of her eye (I still call her Lizzie. You’ll have to call her Elizabeth; we’re all grown-ups here). Lizzie’s eyes look Asian, a souvenir of premature birth. Chinese waiters think she’s Korean and Korean waiters think she’s Japanese. It drives them crazy. Dumb old ladies used to shout across the sidewalk “Hey, what’s the matter with her eyes?” But we can’t wait for the light to dawn. We’re busy people. I have to go scribble on things. Lizzie has to ride her bicycle all over town, her curly hair streaming and her short legs pumping. There she is, spinning through the traffic. Watch out for wilding cabs.
THEY TURN UNTO THE PATRIARCH AND THE PATRIARCH IS OUT TO LUNCH

A hundred people around the table
Waiter will bring me the check
He'd fight through sumo wrestlers
razor wire and rivers of vomit
to bring me the check
It's this white beard

Brisk walk along the Serpentine
Framed by the sun: young woman in latex
comes running
Glowing sparkling breathing deep
But she smiles
and wishes me a good morning
That ruins everything
It's this white beard

I can still see the faces
in the deck of *Authors*
the intellectual's version of Go Fish
(What an easy game to cheat in!)
I wanted to look like Hawthorne
with egg-yolk yellow hair
never Longfellow with that
long long long white beard
not that long white beard

SENTIMENTAL MOMENT OR WHY DID THE BAGUETTE CROSS THE ROAD?

Don't fill up on bread
I say absent-mindedly
The servings here are huge

My son, whose hair may be receding a bit, says
Did you really just say that to me?

What he doesn't know is that when we're walking together, when we get to the curb
I sometimes start to reach for his hand
DRYING OUT

The day my father came home from the hospital,
My stepmother thought he should take on the project
Of re-stringing the kitchen blinds, to keep his mind
Off the booze, something to do with his hands. She fed
Him black coffee, grocery store donuts, supervised
From the next room. He'd take one blind down,

Spread it out across the formica table,
Then cut the strings, fanning the steel slats open,
Dusting them off with a t-shirt. In one hand, a cigarette,

In the other, the cord, trembling. All day
He measured, then cut, then fed the cord through the holes,
The metal nicking his hands. My stepmother

Watched, shaking her head. Months later, on one of those
Nights she would hold long talks with the woman
She wanted to be, she would tell how long

It had taken him, how many times he had dropped the cord,
Picked it up and tried to thread it through. When he finished,
I remember how he stood there—jerking

The blinds up and down, tilting them open and closed, the room
Becoming bright, then dark, the view of the O'Grady's
Next door lawn now green, now lost.
Does this look like a gas station? A long silence fills our ears. OK, yeah, you've all done what you can to fool me.

But goddammit, you know I don't stand a Chinaman's chance without my set of wrenches. I tell him not to worry so much. He hangs up. And I'm left with the image of my father angry at 2 a.m.,

1963, bumping into me in our small Wichita bathroom. I never knew why, but without warning he punched me above the right eye, without a word knocked me down to the dirty yellow tiles. He'd never struck me before. I was 14,

trying to escape childhood, and went back to bed too stunned to cry, wanting this to be a bad dream I could slip out of.

Instead, I closed my eyes and read myself back into the Heinlein novel I'd bookmarked. The family of the future swallows their breakfast pills, refuels their backpacks; smiling and rising into the clear sky with hands joined, they slide away at some apogee of their own making. . . . Now, the millennium

slowly ticking away, I stroke my wife's lovely inner thigh and ratchet myself back down into sleep. When the phone rings again, I lift the receiver and hear nothing but silence on the line. Who is this? I ask and ask again, a question silence can't answer.

THE LAST TIME I SAW MY FATHER

I never realized his legs were so white, veined marble stretched on the nursing home bed, the toes on his left foot gnarled and twisted as earthbound roots.

Our company commander said since I was the shortest, I would "scout" the hedgerows. So I went down the rows with my full field pack, gas mask and M1 rifle. 15 minutes down the rows, a German soldier fired at me. I shot back and he went down.

The gown they'd put him in was riding up near the large elastic diaper.

Dad, I said, but he was lost in sleep, a tree fallen in a deep forest.

It was in the Saar Basin, at daylight, when all hell broke loose. Red flares. Trees bursting into flame and men down all around me.

Then a nurse stopped in to wake him, to give him his sleeping pills.

She nudged, prodded, then yelled into his good ear. He's really out,
she said, but I have to make him take these, it's my job.

I asked what the German medics were going to do but got no response. Were they going to cut off my leg? Both legs? Four of them held me down and put me out with a stink rag.

Dad rallied awake.
He blinked and glanced around the room. Peggy,
he said, calling the nurse by my mother's name,
then he looked at me.

I had developed infection in both legs (osteomyelitis), one leg being worse than the other. I was carried outside on a stretcher and sprayed with DDT.

Doc, he said, losing my name again, what are you going to do with me?

I nodded at the nurse's hand, at the tiny seeds of sleep.

She moved above him and down in the dim room. Dad opened his mouth

I may have killed a man. I don't know. What did he think, his last seconds on earth?

and let the pills rest on his tongue.
Then he took a deep breath, heroically, and swallowed.

SOFT LANDINGS
—for SP

We lay naked on the pliant roof of your VW van, imagining, beyond the cottonwood, the moon landing.

Apollo was snug in the Sea of Tranquility. Armstrong and Buzz and the boys, feeling impossibly lucky,

lowered the lunar ladder and broke the surface. Which is when you began humming the theme from Mission Impossible and climbed onto me, lucky me, mosquitoes revving their little motors around us, looking for a world to touch down on.

A cloud passed over the moon at the first kiss of space boots on the astral soil.
My fingertips traced the constellation of freckles on your shoulder. The radio crackled touchdown as, through whoops and applause, I bent up to lick an eyelid open.

We would want our eyes open for this, the roof of the world off at last.
PLAYING POSSUM

Something was gnawing at my dream
and, awake now, I hear one of our cats
loudly crunching at his bowl in the kitchen.
But here in bed I make out the shapes
of all three cats, a triumvirate
around my wife and me. I leap up
through the question of something wrong,
honey? and stumble toward the mad
chewing. I flick on the light. There,
in the corner, pink as a piglet, a baby
possum startles from the bowl of Kitten
Kaboodle, crumbs flaking around its tiny
gash of mouth. And here's Linda,
fully awake now, too, with not only a broom
for her, but one for me. She flings me mine
like Ricky Nelson tossing Chance (John Wayne)
his loop-handled carbine in Rio Branco.
And we're shutting doors behind us
and opening doors to the outside world,
which clearly terrifies this arboreal
rodent who's little more than whiplash
tail and provisional hiss. He scampers
under the German Schrank. I take a couple
of swipes underneath and tease out
a dust-covered catnip toy, a disposable
Bic, and half of what might have been
a slice of Donato's (pepperoni). The possum
folds into itself like a fist. But Linda
is choking up and waving her broom, ready,
so I clobber the thing broadside. It skids out
like a top-ended puck to my wife, who swings—
her breasts jiggling wonderfully (did I mention
we're both bone naked?)—and I'm skating
toward the wide-open front door, this 2 a.m.
game of Possum Broomball almost fun now,
and smack it so hard the critter cartwheels
like a cartoon possum through a racket
of katydid s and other night fiddlers
and lands like a wad of flubber on the lawn.

Linda and I stand on the front porch, victorious,
our brooms like truncheons at parade rest.
Our next-door neighbor Jaime, home
from the late shift, drives past and turns
her blue Toyota into the drive, fixing us
with headlights. It's scary how seriously
these Worleys take their housecleaning
she may be saying to herself, at which point
there's nothing left for us to do, but wave.

David Moolten

IDIOM

She'd emerge from mist and stone silence
Like a Delphic priestess, her voice
Sudden and foreign to them
In the day room, miraculous
For its unknowable context, the gist
Of ninety years; and they'd ignore
How real she'd become.

She had no past to speak of
Except when she spoke. Her days
Droned on and on. They could listen
To themselves hum as she talked,
Refusing to imagine her
Hair light brown as in the photograph
Her infrequent daughter brought
Like a chrysanthemum saved
From October frost.

Yet they felt
What they heard. Her comments had flesh,
A thin veil easily bruised. And even
When she stopped, her body continued
To whisper, its breathing
A common expression, its heartbeat
A proverb, but in a dead language, cryptic
As an oracle, wise beyond words.

**Diane Averill**

**THIS PIECE REMOVED FROM THE EXHIBIT DUE TO COMPLAINTS REGARDING THE MISUSE OF FRUIT IMAGERY**

—the sign found above a blank white space

The bolts remain,
and the white wall,
and the absence of misused fruit.

The watermelon whose insides
were scooped was seedless to begin with.
Not fair for us to view the green cave
that was all
the artist left.

And the cantaloupe has gone rolling
somewhere in the sky,
but the viewer shouldn’t
worry. It’s happier as the fifth moon of Jupiter.

Only the apple, discolored, bruised,
definitely misused, is to be
pitied. It hides its starry, black beginnings
from those who want it only for its beautiful gold skin.

Someone disliked how the grapes hung,
how they invited mouths
to cover their green nipples.

Before the removal of the fruit
there was no reason for guilt.
After the misuse of removal,
the fruit imagined its roots,
regenerated in other paintings
and hung itself,
not in despair,
but, yes, in secret.

All over the city, fruit crept
into other paintings.
Raspberry juice dripped from a watercolor brush.
Figs, peeled down to their inner chambers,
shrugged off one acrylic attempt
to cover them with their own leaves.

Arms blossomed. Artists marveled at their
originality as the fruit reasserted its origins.
Sculptures became fruit orchards,
producing cherries
even the most cranky of complainers
would not hesitate to keep,
though perhaps disguised in pies.
Peter Cooley

Two Poems

THE RAT CONSIDERS MY SISTER

Both red eyes pinned to her, the creature
considered his alternatives: 1. return to the rathole;
2. attack, 3. befriend this least of God's.

He chose the third. But you need background.
Before the nursing home my sister existed
years between teaching jobs in apartments trashed

by her riots of hatred for me, Mother and Dad,
God, the universe, herself.
Vichyssoise, poulet orange, my mother's favorite

foods were her machine gun, disarray
her atomic missile: she could broil a filet,
then call my mother long distance in Detroit,

snicker as Mother gasped to hear her feed it
to a disposal in Seattle or L.A., stay up all night
laying out a buffet of caviar, London Broil, mushrooms

sauteed to be abandoned at first lights for ants
and roaches or, days later, such as our feral hero
in this poem. Call him Gabriel, a savior. OK, boy, go.

Gabriel stares at my sister: ninety pounds,
still dieting, she's taken in three triscuits,
a carrot, a cup of consommé since yesterday.

Every chair and tabletop bears an ashtray,
a discarded bit of finery: a silk belt from Asks,
a cocktail dress designed for Bonwit Teller

or untouched, scrumptious edibles.
Gold-foiled, the Godiva chocolates winked,
perched at her feet on a purple stool

my grandmother had embroidered in her madness
"Gad loves you." Gabriel, too, knows love.
It is for chocolate. My sister presides before it.

But how they came to the joyous summit
at which our poem closes you will have to invent,
reader. I only know for several years until banal

Wisconsin cheese in the next door apartment
laced with poison sent him to an untimely,
Gabriel and my sister supped each night.

He beside her in her nicotined puce slip
blew on her cigarette to keep it lit, perfect gentleman.
She was his lady, sported ruby earrings, a forearm of gold

jangles for their evenings. She learned to laugh.
I heard her cackle however far I fled.
I hear her now. Godiva chocolates arrived daily when she called.

AUBADE WITH SON AND SUN AND CONTINENTAL BREAKFAST ON THE HOUSE

Were I to tell him his profile is beautiful
in the first light running the beach with us,
both of us stuporous, my son at fifteen might feint
a blow at my "stuck out" ears he inherited
or, worse, shoot me a glance so full of lead
I couldn't fixate on how rapturous it is
to race the sun just coming up and bask, luminous, in its reflection.
Therefore, I won't chance it. Who wants language
at 6:46 am? Maybe you, reader,
hungry for something more or else why are you here,
so many claims on your attention superior to mine,
in better color, clearer print, superior soundtrack, longer memory,
more megabytes than mine. This is just a poem, ruthlessly
heterodox in its appeal, rather conventional in technique
though I like the underlying couplets,
that zeugma, a couple double entendres

38 POETRY

NORTHWEST 39
and the consonances and cadences, how about you?
What are you going to do today?
It is 7:24 am; we all are ravenous,
my son, me and you. I gave you a run,
now here's your chalk white cup, café au lait,
wheat toast, two croissants, a banana I'm slicing with my pocket knife.
I believe in dealing with the stuff we've got
for poetry, not what we haven't, except for the empyrean,
oblivion, the ineluctable, my choice
of memories about small circles in hell I've pulled myself out of
and I have a full beverage selection of tap water
you and I can whisper into wine. I'm glad you're staying
to share my petit dejeuner; I'm grateful, really,
for your time. My son, you see, is off at the computer,
refining my metaphors and running a program
from a world I'll never enter, will you?
Whipped butter? or just light margarine for your toast?
Orange marmalade or plum? One lump or two?

Carol Barrett

COUNTERPOINT

My six-year-old has saved a gray mouse
from being eaten alive, out of the cat's
mouth like a fish hook, holding
his ears back. He had pawed it
all across the rug, claw-pricks
she wet with a bowl of water
from her play kitchen. I held him
on my chest and he didn't run away!
Those tiny beats thrumming her heart,
shuddering the space between there
and now, her fervor quiet, boundless.

My daughter cannot know how I too
have kept awake for a thumping
far faster than my own beat minding
the hours, how I have charted
the dipping frequency of thumb-print
kicks, irregularities in pitch
and tone, hearts like a tandem
bicycle, lub-dup lub-dup underlying
pum-bum pum-bum pub-bum pum-bum.
She cannot know how I have memorized
this music precisely, point
by counterpoint, felt the cool
mask of oxygen as rhythm rearranged
itself, the quick beat slowing almost
to a match, disappearing in the fog,
then resuming like a train around a bend,
the nurses' faces pretending to hide
what they know, the way they signal
each other with minimum alarm,
the staccato pianissimo of code words,
a gurney arriving in my room, one
side split down in a split-second.
I imagine this the same ecstasy of nuns
in a summer rain, habits fluttering like peach
blossoms in the wind, or of a hailstorm
in the middle of Kansas that keeps
coming, and coming, yes the ecstasy
of a congregation of crickets beneath
a tree-house before the call to supper,
of ferris wheels rocking the sky blue
and blue, of ferns unfurling their long
slow curls to the sun, of the first
grass knot tied for the first doll.

My daughter knows only that she hid
the mouse in the ball closet,
imagines him there still, rumpling
winter scarves and mittens, building
a mouse house with play kitchen,
a jungle gym made of hangers and old ties.
She imagines he is forever safe
in the world, this very moment
nestled in, watching the latest
little mouse video, munching popcorn.

As I imagine *pum-bum pum-bum*
my little girl, my thimble-hearted baby, forever breathing.

FEAR OF HEIGHTS

I had forgotten my father
built me stilts, cedar poles polished
like a hope chest, foot-ledge secured
by a strip of tire. Forgotten
how I clamored over the lawn
like a heron with broken leg,
the driveway too unforgiving
for spills, my hands flailing the air,
the smell of clover on landing,
steady coaching: *try it again.*

Somebody mentioned stilts and I
fell back to that place—we are called
to account for things—persistent
mole hills, border geraniums
bitter as daisies even now.
I think of wood, of how my breath
leapt out of its cage the first time
I drove across a narrow bridge
on the Mississippi, alone,
without knowing what lay ahead,
what skies or ground or red flowers
blooming. My father loved me well.

He thought I could do anything—
boy, or girl, the child who came
lumbering along, heaven-sent
after my mother's miscarriage.
To think such legacy would drive
despair or elevate chagrin
to dread. Imagine that! I fell

and fell again like a body
dropped from its lair of womb and still
the grain's in my hands, the wooden
dreaming, blood-born, propelled without
a conscious thought. He stopped me once,
released his hold: *I said you could
do anything, not everything.*
LEXICON FOR ENDING RELATIONSHIPS WITHOUT PESTICIDES

Begin with prevention, of course:
grow suitable plants. Practice
rotation, promote garden diversity:
legumes and pods; aromatic alliums—
garlic and leek; brassicas—
broccoli and kale, kohlrabi,
bok choy, cabbage and cauli; root
and tuber crops—eggplant, peppers,
parsnips, tenacious cousin carrots.
Distinguish the enemy (jaws
pointing down toward what it walks on)
from the alliance of kindred
spiders, green lacewings, predacious
ground beetles, flower flies.
Introduce barriers, traps,
biological controls. Freedom
follows forethought and tactical
specificity. For persistent ants
apply chili pepper at the point
of entry, including back doors
left unlocked during normal business
hours. In the case of parasitic
aphids, release ladybugs at dusk,
a flurry trained to eat.
Trap apple maggots with blackstrap
molasses, water and yeast, the ferment
sloshed into wide-mouthed jars
and hung in trees, like lanterns.
Cutworms operate at night, slicing
innocent seedlings. Cover plants
with toilet paper tubes; spread cornmeal
or clover honey. One bloats the pest,
the other immobilizes intentions.
For pernicious ear wigs, spread damp
rolled-up newspapers. Check daily
and dump bugs in a bucket of suds. Flush
moles out of holes with garden hose.
Slugs demand an underhanded plot:
set open cans of beer throughout
the premises to encourage drowning
or search and destroy at dark
when unsuspecting lurkers are about.
Rid insidious weeds without
hesitation: cut erect canes
of blackberry and douse stumps
with boiling water. Bury poison
ivy and oak under an old carpet,
your own dense history. Neier
dispose of morning glory with compost,
for memory will trail and smother
any brazen, fresh start.
HERITAGE

—The Incas of Peru developed 3000 separate varieties of potato. —CALC newsletter, 1990

Consider the skins first, a litany of races: russet, corn, cacao. Fruit of the plains coaxed warm by that flor del sol, spun gold, cooling under a dark plum hillside, jacaranda humming the air, soft prowl of the jaguar.

And then the rounded contours of harvest, the women’s bulging skirts, baskets and bowls of potatoes al mercado, hand-picked for the pestle, the leaven of meal and flour, potato cakes steaming smooth stones in the sun.

Slipped from the loam, young ones small as walnuts nourish the worker’s satchel, the maiden’s fertile mouth. She walks on potatoes, chuño beneath her feet. Some grow large as melons. She cuts the hearts out, purples them with grapes.

The tenacious are split and carved, geometry of globe and thistle, tooth and gourd. Soaked in the blood-dyes of the hills, they stamp the temples of caves, call across canyons of laurel, the hunger of the new world.

The many-eyed are saved for the sick, slashed open over the wound to absorb the spirits of clay. I know a man who rubs a cut potato over his scalp to restore a mat of hair. He claims the Indians taught him. They had thick, black proof.

Imagine a cleft in the trees, llamas carrying cool bags of drink squeezed from the starch-sugared pulp, a trace of ferment and a cavern below the cliff stashed with a thousand earth-wrought wines.

Imagine the delicate crossing of strains, the coupling of eyes, mated plots numbered in the sun, the first bounty of a new breed heavy and bronze in your hand like a sign, the crisp wet taste of the future. Pomme de terre.

Imagine potatoes round as moonflowers baking in black coals, the keep of ashes until the flickering dancing gives way to dawn, steamy meal of the soul. Then imagine his russet tuber homing in the earthy folds of her flesh, three thousand

Incan fields waking to sunlight.
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WE NEED YOUR HELP

Poetry Northwest is in its forty-first 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