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Editor
David Wagoner

Cover from a photo of a
young elephant

Photo by Robin Seyfried

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POETRY  NORTHWEST

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POETRY NORTHWEST

AUTUMN 2000

Bob Hicok

Two Poems

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

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
or 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

Four Poems

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 *eeeeooit!*
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 confreres 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 us 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-REALY-SERIOUSLY-
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—scantly, 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-Dipped

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.

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.

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 Pasoan'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? Rain-wash 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.

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 Chihuahita 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 GIs.
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? Chihuahita'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

mourning 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.

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.

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', Girlie?* 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.

2.
Now Donna is walking with a cane
because she has a bad hip and strangers
(those *same* dumb people thirty years later!)
say "Operation, huh?" and "What did *you*
do to yourself?" Although she says
cabs give her an extra second or two
to reach the curb. Donna is Lizzie's stepmother.
That is, she's my wife. Or Lizzie's late mother's
second ex-husband's second wife. There is another
stepmother out in the Mission district,
wife of the man from Oklahoma,
but she's in her own time zone.
I put my whole family
together out of scraps, Lizzie says.
Donna doesn't like it when I refer to my "first
wife." She says it makes her feel like one
in a series or as though she's lost a race.
But former, ex-, late and then- don't seem much better.
Let's not quibble, not when the streets are choked
with anonymous white trucks, dented and gleaming.
All the drivers are losing it, lowering their horns
and charging wildly into the bicycles and the chugging
walkers and the misty little sedans. I know, I know,
I won't shout back or raise a fist. Just give them a
Mark McGwire swing or two, cane to windshield,
and let's all get across.

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.

MY FATHER CALLS AT 4 A.M.,

having by now forgotten about time
zones, forgotten the name of the black
thing he holds to his ear.

Possibly, this week, he's forgotten
my name, his own. But somehow
he's punched me up

and has a question: Will I tell him,
will somebody please tell him,
why after all these years

he and my mother are living
in a gas station? *How did we get
here? If somebody beeps*

*their horn, does this mean
they want me to pump the gas?
How much do I charge?*

I disassemble myself from the dream
he tore me from, of trying to jog
across marshland, sinking deeper

with each step. *Dad, you're home
with Mom, not in some filling station,
I say on the portable,*

sliding a cup of cold coffee
into the microwave. *Look around
at all your things there, I say,*

shuffling logic to the top of the deck.
*The antique cabinet, the painting we bought
from that old Indian in Tucson—Running Elk;*

*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 Bravo*.
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 katydids 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

When her mind left her so
Did the world, having furnished a shrine
Of mopped tile halls and pink rose wallpaper,
The perfunctory young
Caretakers of an age.

But now

And then while they clattered a spoon
Of gruel between her teeth or hoisted
Her naked on the shower chair, she'd blurt out
A tiny fragment of her life,
Saying *Henry, Henry, I see the lake*
Or *this is the music I love*.

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

—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.

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

sautéed 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

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, cafe 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

Four Poems

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 holded 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 hall 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. *Never*

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

