

Poetry

NORTHWEST



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Editor
David Wagoner

Cover from a photo of a
gray jay, also known as
camp robber or Whiskey Jack

Photo by Robin Seyfried

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POETRY NORTHWEST

SPRING 2000

Cathleen Calbert

Two Poems

LIKE

When that fallen leaf of a girl,
 my milkmaid,
 banana-pan-cake,
 Listerine, little tickle,
 honey muffin, desperado,
 Mystic, Connecticut,
 difficult situation,
 forever amber waves of loving debate,
 her eyes like dying doves,
 like my own desire,
 her milky/dewy/cloudy neck
 a chrysanthemum of hopefulness,
 her hair burning like a hay fire,
 like a gas jet,
 like a matchstick,
 the czarina's hot jewels,
 an act of forgiveness,
 a misunderstanding,
 burning, I tell you, just like fire,
 her breasts like the snowcones of my youth,
 like macaroons, a fine flan,
 strawberry PopTarts
 (with powdered sugar and water icing),
 yet, truth be told, really more
 like the mammary glands of cute, young monkeys,
 her belly a valley of despair

for travelers from third world
 (that is, developing) countries,
 her thighs a memory ... of something,
 her feet like Peppermint candy,
 like a clam's treasure offered up nightly
 at the sandy fish shacks
 along Little Compton, RI
 (the best-kept secret of our ocean state,
 the smallest one in the union
 and yet not any less
 beautiful for all that),
 finally spoke to me, her lips
 like diamonds, like sapphires,
 like the best canned spaghetti,
 I listened like a chimpanzee,
 like a defrocked priest,
 like the last dying fish
 in an unclean fishbowl
 atop a dead woman's antique bureau,
 to her words as if
 I had a red ribbon tied around my neck
 a coughdrop lodged in my larynx,
 hairball in my idiotic kitty-licking throat,
 like I was the cat falling
 sixty floors from a luxury building
 and who knows goddamned well
 that it's not going to land
 on its famous feet this time, jack,
 no matter how many ambulances are waiting,
 their cherries circling like helicopter blades,
 their white doors as open as Thanksgiving,
 spewing forth neatly groomed ambulance men,
 with their asphalt-black hair slicked back,
 like a duck's happy ass in a bucolic setting
 of wild bunnies
 and fearless, full-grown fawns,
 where like-minded lovers
 can hold each other's hands
 like lovers holding each other's hands
 on a bright winter morning

when the new snow
 has made everyone as happy
 as the first day of spring
 when it feels like—
 "I don't love you,"
 she said, just like that,
 and, brother, let me tell you ,
 that I felt like,
 I felt like,
 I felt

STEPMOTHER

She is the woman with a spiked apple
 waiting in the lining of her pocket,

who demands that you alone clean up
 a thousand lentils strewn in the cinders,

who lets loose three fat ravens
 to swallow all of the breadcrumbs

you tearfully drop on your way
 into the fearsome, wolf-lined forest.

Child, hurry! I fear for your safety!
 What is that witch doing at home

while you are falling to your knees
 with loneliness and discouragement?

She is sleeping with your father
 in a bed as soft as roses and as high.

*She is the woman who sleeps with your father.
 She is the woman who is not your mother.*

For your mother, dear child, has died.
 She is a ray of sunshine, a cloudburst,

the talking river, bird song at dawn.
Platonic and perfect. You miss her.

But your father buries his horse-face
between his wife's hard breasts and sighs.

He dips into the darkness of her womb.
He plows her fresh, new fields, singing

while you wait at the table, frowning
into your cold porridge, sad darling,

or beat the pigs with a stick or tease
the goats into tumbling down cliffs

or weaken your child-eyes with embroidery:
"Beloved Mother, Always in Our Memory."

*She is the woman who is not your mother.
She is the woman who sleeps with your father.*

You must wait for divine retribution,
for your mother to return from heaven

as three white doves who will eat
the insides of your stepsister's pretty eyes

and finally ignite hell's fires beneath
your stepmother's high-flying boots.

Stephen Thomas

Two Poems

NARCISSUS

The boy had gone but his image
stayed in the pool. The green eye and bizarre
couture attracting chimeras and basilisks.

The boy returned to find it stuck there
on the membrane of the pool, thinner
than a photograph, as thin as beaten gold.

He tried to lift it with his breath,
as though to gild the frame he kept ideas in,
but it would not be lofted. There

it stayed and trembled with desire.
It went on aging, as he aged, and changing,
as he changed, a miracle of parallel

inconstancy. It coupled there
with everything that came: a hundred times
with Argus, thrice with Cerberus.
The Sphinx and every Niebelungen gnome
had known it carnally, when he returned
to see it flecked and fouled.

All his sex had been anonymous,
until he let his last resistance flee
and fell entirely for this.

It swallowed

all the gift, the giver
and the act of giving,
everything

before it closed,
grew still
and baited itself once more
with empty blue.

FRAGMENT

Today we take for our text
this from the Codex Archilochus
...n...

Here the poet reminds us
of the architect's ultimate question:
what kind of ruin will this construction become?

It is all a matter of becoming.
How much nothing can something absorb
and remain either some or a thing?

How many angels can dance
in the human mind
before it dissolves in the light?

and what then becomes of its shadows?
How many ellipses can an oeuvre absorb,
maintaining its length of appeal?

n...wrote the poet, meaning,
perhaps, *the shape your lips thus, press
your tongue to your palate and breathe*

through your nose, unless this was
silent, terminal ...n, signing
Get lost! which we are

and it is.
Without at least some sense
of border, there in the field of erosion,

we have lost our orientation.
So let us join to the text
...n... our own little fragment,

this ...i... of our own.
It gives us the negative particle
or the locative preposition,

which leads to today's conclusion:
I can't spin it out of myself
without more; without more

there is no out of myself.

Keith Ratzlaff

THE BIG CIRCUS

The only circus ever
in my small town
Pitched its tent
in our one park
beside the tennis court,
beside the top of the slide
my brother fell from that day.
He'd run away from home,
to the park, to the slide
that was as much circus
as he could imagine
in a small town,
our faces written in the dirt
generation after one after another.
He took a girl with him—
on the lam—he was five.
Later that summer
they would climb the step ladder,
fold out the little platform
that said "This is not a step"
and kill a new-born kitten—
that little tight rope walker
working without a rope—
by lifting it there
over and over, the cat head first
off and off until you know already.
The big top. He was gone
so early. But the circus:

We were all umbrellas
twirling into the tent
which was breathing its way
open and up and then flags.
One flag, really. And my brother
later that summer, dropping
matches in the fuel oil tank.
We were so lucky.
I won a black glass hand
in the shape of an ashtray.
He couldn't read the warning.
It only seemed our houses were in flames.
The circus was one wagon
one tent, one bear—nothing
high enough to fall from.
And he bit his tongue
nearly through for all
it taught him. It was an omen
that told our fortunes: "This
is not a step," the step said.
And we were all still alive then
but planning how not to be.

Krista Halverson

Four Poems

MATRIARCH

This summer Aunt Claire takes me driving
from Prineville
to the Columbia; we can see Washington from its
bank. I use the rest-stop Ladies'
after her, see the Preamble

in her languid scroll on the door of the stall. *We the Women
of the United States...*

Riverside, our buttocks leave prints like ripe
avocados on cold mud. We talk well, and later,
in her car, I sit on a towel but she

takes her pants off, drives past the station
and waves at the ranger in her panties.
I ask her why she never had children. She says,
We don't any of us know our own bodies.
I throw my pants in the back seat. In the motel we fall asleep

to the Discovery Channel. She says it has that effect
on her. I wake up to hysterical laughing— 2 a.m. animal laughter
that sounds like retching. The narrator's sterile voice:
With hyenas, it is females

*that preside. The birth of daughters
is an event, and twins—when such a thing occurs—come slick
with strong, dense limbs.
Awash in testosterone, they literally
come out fighting.*

Claire is gaping in her sleep. Her mouth is soft red-rimmed.
The sounds she makes are what have awoken me
after all. Well, then, she would say, The wilderness
may be in our blood.
Claire is the oldest of her sisters,

thirty-nine and unmarried. The scarves she ties

on her neck wrestle in myriad
bright knots. Her gait is giving men
something to talk about. Those who have known her say
she is barren, or selfish. Claire says

my grandmother, her speckled eyes
bright as salmon backs, bore her daughters early,
and that she was lucky. The next morning she brings me
the continental
breakfast: M&Ms from the vending machine. We are gone
before the wake-up call.

LISTENING TO AUNT COY TALK INSTEAD OF MUSIC

Aunt Coy says if she'd got the job
there'd have been 4 to 6 minutes between
the tour bus and the backstage door,
exactly 4 to 6
judging his stride as just wider than hers,
which is the way she figured it.
Neil Diamond, she says. Just his name,

then a sigh because I still can't understand the rules
of pinochle. She deals an arc of cards,
shuffles them back into her hand
like a gift to herself. This game is all hers,
she says, all hers. It hadn't worked out
for Coy—something about not lifting
one hundred pounds. Doesn't take that much
to match two shoes, she says,
or powder a nose—even Neil's nose, which is
no small thing. What a jewel

of a summer job. All of a sudden she drops her cards,
throws up her arms like she's looking
for a tattoo. She's held a lot
with them, she says, a thousand pounds of babies, for
one thing. Maybe they look weak next to her
broad hips—like sprouts from a bulb.
But they're strong as screwdrivers.

This night Coy dreams it
all over. Neil's teeth gleam in one welded
white arc, like an oracle. And her dead husband sings
back-up. In her mind Scott is
exactly like he looked at the Diamond concert
when they went together in '78. Coy could see Scott perfectly,
down to the way his lips spread around a grin
that showed his own ridge of teeth
like a cantaloupe rind.

She is up at two this morning. I hear
her turn over Neil's record several times. Long enough
to hear every scratch on every ballad
through the wall.

WHAT MOTHER WAS THINKING

A car may come through this window. I feel
engines swell in my ears. I understand only glass
and reason work to keep peace.

Only days ago I was at home,
my ankles softening in water, waiting for the tub
to fill. What roamed that house,
the rooms I had emptied,
was the sound of winter heat.
I dried by the open vent
in spite of my cloud-colored robe.

Leaving home is how everything begins
and how it ends. My hands,
bound-up reeds, turn colors underwater,
make shapes they have memorized.

Around my daughter's face
they fit by heart. She'll remember
me saying, *How are you, love?*
Eat breakfast,
her chin lifting to my lips.

THE MOOD THIS AFTERNOON

At the door is an oven mitt
attached to a Sister whose face is red
in the steam of soup.
She doesn't say *Honey, let me in, let out
the girls*, but I obey her.

Perfumes slosh in all the bottles she dusts
around. She's very good
at cleaning me up and the traces of me.
I would like to go out

with a squirt on each wrist, my best
clothes heavy and wet with scent.
Until I can't smell anything but me.

I should have a dozen more pictures
of myself, in frames. There are babies floating
on all the walls of this house.

Here is what else I want, in writing, so you can't
forget: my daughters to sit in piles
of my clothes. My sons to stumble
on my pearls, clicking
on the bottom of the drawer. Someone
who looks like me
to bring the youngest home from school.

And one more thing,
I look like a witch, and someone
ought to tell me.

Ron Houchin

GIRL ASLEEP AT THE BEACH

Here where the earth dives
below the ocean, kids scream,
jumping backwards into waves,
adults sit serene as cats
watching clouds, she seems
to sleep, or to try to.
Thin as a sea oat stem,
in shorts and halter top,
she rests on her towel,
arm pillowing her head.

I wonder if she dreams
of the cool, blue embrace
to come or just waits
for her friends to return
on surf boards. She sleeps
as if curled around a mystery
about the rest of her life,
one even she can't know.
A flotilla of aubergine clouds
threatens-by, at the very tip of vision.

The lifeguard pulls in his flag
and climbs down the ladder,
his day nearly ending.
She rouses and hugs herself. Kids
have not stopped screaming
for what they want to see.
She gathers the three big towels,
squints out at the horizon,
and kicks the silver ends of waves
down the sand toward the life to come.

HANGING TINSEL

The two of us in that dark room
where the only lights were blinking bulbs
with liquid that boiled to the tops
and settled down
all night long while my father set
single silver thread after thread
until the needled branch glittered
and he moved on,
left me beside the three reindeer
tugging the five-inch plywood
slat-sled,
my father not yet reeling
from the quarts of beer
or my mother's absence
as he doled out the silver strings,
his slender fingers lifting and setting
each separate, glittering strand
until there were waves of silver
wafting
whenever one of us shifted or bent,
whole walls of shimmerings
that reflected us back in thin strips,
his ringed hand, my left shoulder,
his nose, my eyebrow, shreds
of us hung on those branches
sagged
with candycanes and red-eyed,
scraggly-feathered, white birds,
with snow-painted pinwheels
that whirled in his slightest whisper,
his white sweatshirt there, a sliver
of his khaki pants,
the right side of my mouth, my ear,
there in the hush of our held breaths
as we stretched out to hang yet
another, and another, and another
silver thread.

MY MOTHER AND I AT THE TABLE

My mother sits across the table,
reading Oneida on the silverware
she holds to the sun filtering
through her window,
just four feet away yet so distant,
I know I can't reach her no matter
what I say,
all of the names gone into the
battered toast and blue cups
of coffee,
all of the screams in that other
kitchen
silent here where my mother fingers
the buttons on her bathrobe,
tells me she really ought to go home,
her too-red lips in that perpetual pout
even now at seventy-eight,
both breasts gone, most of her uterus,
the night she high-heeled
off our front porch without one look back,
my mother innocent
again in St. John's Alley, rising for work
in Cohoes Textile,
scattering the muskrats that crawl from the
canal
into the cold rooms, kneeling on linoleum
with a quick sign of the cross
as she had us do back in that unholy rowhouse,
doing it here, in Troy, New York,
to list the venial sins she'd committed during
the week,
asking me, her confessor, her son, to forgive
the bad thought,
the silence when her uncle kissed her cheek,
my mother what? ten? eleven? down on her
arthritic knees
on the fourth floor of this Home for the Elderly
where I have come for my annual visit
to sulk and remind her I am the last of three

beautiful sons,
to flash pictures of my house and wife and own
children
before her pudgy face and whisper See, See what
I've done,
let her know our Thanksgiving dinner table was
full with relatives and friends
while she sat at the far end of the blue dining
room
no longer waiting for anyone to come, lifting
the one glass of milk
she still limits herself to each day because
she can't break the habit,
sucking the meat from the bones, cleaning
her plate
with a slice of bread till it gleams back
like it does today,
my mother staring at the crust in mine,
the leftover egg,
not sure to tell whoever I am that it's
not right to waste,
her eyes looking for words I hope she
never finds.

THE COPPER FROG

My wife wants a copper frog
that squirts a long stream of water
from its mouth,
and she wants it set right there,
at the edge of the pond,
which means I need to ditch-witch
at least a foot-deep line to run
the water tubing more than sixty
feet,
with a switch-off for when it turns
cold, and suddenly I'm seeing again
my first backyard,
where my mother's painting stones
white
and rolling them over the grass,
for *Effect*, she said,
green slime smeared all over so
the stones would blend in but still
define her garden,
me shaking my head, even at ten,
unable to comprehend why
we could not wait for the paint
to dry,
rolling them end on end till
they formed just the right design,
which is what my wife's after,
I think, as I put my cold beer
down on the patio table and
walk beside her to the pond's
edge
where she sees the copper frog
squinting his stream of water,
her finger sure as she points
to the small hollow beside the boat,
whispering all the while that he
could go absolutely nowhere else.

WHY YOU MUST HAVE A MOTORCYCLE

Say you cannot unwind the sheets from your legs,
or ancient trees have fallen across your lawn
and require the chainsaw which you refuse to own,
or five select chairs lined up in a row
cannot make you comfortable, or the street
black and glazed with rainwater is as empty
as you would have it, or yes, the players
come off the field and they are too real,
they are boys or men who wish nothing more
than to spend their lives playing this game
while somewhere there is a fist filling up with rage—

say there is money involved and you must get up
or today there are single words frying on the pan
of your brain and allowing any one of them to rise
into your body into the warm hum of your throat
to pass through your tongue and lips...is to weep,
or maybe yesterday's socks are still fresh enough
and what you know about this day is that it is
happening somewhere else, right? in some street
full of smoke and waiting, in some ditch, in some
alley, in some room grown small with voice
where the body grows small, the heart, the face—

still you will stare at the walls on which you
have placed the photographs of your mother
and father, your wife and children saying cheese,
your dog standing in a field of flowers gazing
at mountains, or your cats curled together
in the rocking chair, of yourself victorious
on the cliff's precipice next to one large raven
who held his place on a sandstone rock where you
wanted to stand, of the Harley-Davidson
you once owned and drove without a helmet
and sold in a fit of reason, and now wish to own again.

IN BED

The man did not choose this dream,
this road tumbling over hills,
wheel thrumming in his palms.
The navigator snaps her map

and squints into red and black lines.
In the back seat a small boy reads aloud
from the book of conjured artifacts.
"Petroglyph," he says. "Arrowhead."

The radio grows songless as an old tire.
The navigator chants the names of towns
and historical sites. "Pompey's Pillar,"
she says. "Butte." The boy traces

an elk that stands on its hind legs
holding an ornate shield. The landscape
warps, a rumpled bedspread snapped
into flatness. "Get dressed," she laughs,

"the day is a slippery dancer."
The man watches her hands smooth
away those last lines, every direction
that could be made or unmade.

Donald Platt

SOUND MACHINE

Poetry is
the sound machine
to which my daughter
must listen at night
to fall asleep,
to shut out
the dark around
her. Her sleep
is sound. Push
the button and
a summer night
comes on, surge
and susurrus of crickets,
the bull frogs'
pizzicato, slow
glissando of wind's
fingers across
the shimmery strings
of a silver
birch, black velvet
silence. Touch
another button
and it's ocean
waves, flex
and reflux of the waters'
muscle, endless
rhythm of our
desire, my body
breaking again
against your eroding
shore, dune swell
and coarse beach grass
where an Ipswich sparrow
repeats its one
ecstatic sentence

tsit-tsit-tsit

tseeeee-tsaay

over and over.

But what my daughter
loves best of all
is the heartbeat,
the blood's shush
and backwash, iambic
piledriver's simple
declarative statement,
I am, I am,
that brings my daughter
back home to the womb,
to her mother's
heartbeat and slumbering
breasts, the milk
her mouth once filled and
spilled over with,
our first poem
from which all other
poems come,
midnight's slow ooze
and gush, a rhythm
made flesh,
the sound she will not
be weaned from,
until death.

Gary Gildner

MEASURING

Margaret finds me in my father's garden
out behind the house—a field, now,
of weeds and grasses that are beautiful to her.
She is five and takes her time choosing
this one, this one, making up their names—
Charlotte, Henry Fox, Elizabeth. Oh, and *this* one
is the prize.

 The prize? Yes, the flower
we don't really have a name for.
I think to say she's picked a stalk of timothy
but I stop myself. Nor do I say that thirty
years ago my father, turning up the dirt, right here,
fell, and did not stand again.

 I say he built
that house, an apple tree he planted brushed
the windows where I slept. I say he kept
a pencil underneath his cap, or halfway underneath,
to measure with.

 Measure what? Oh, lots of things,
even kids. For example, like I measure you.
All this pleases her. She reminds me how,
for example, she herself can almost reach
the apple tree outside *her* room at home.
And how, for example, she just needs to
get away sometimes—and grow.

 She takes my hand.
We're a hair rich and half poor—that's how
lucky we are! She turns, alive
with happiness, and whirling
lets me go.

Derek Sheffield

THE GOOD BOOK

He swings from branch to vine, the swift passage of his mighty
frame leaving no trace. His keen, gray eyes read a spoor that
urges him onward.

 Just as the birds fall strangely quiet, the ape-man
suddenly flies from the edge of the jungle to a terrible sight —
Jane trapped. In mid-air he draws his knife, plunging to a
blond back crouched in the grass, one steel-thewed arm locked
around a savage throat, the other stabbing the beast's furry
side. Jane screams —

 sermon over, the boy unfolds his book
from his Bible, marks it, and follows
his family out of the hard-backed pews.
The organ blows slow tones
as they pass through
a wash of gold and red stained light.

 Back home, in his room,
the walls peer with eagles, listen
with elephants and linger with snakes.
Every night, under the green slope of his blanket,
as the familiar plot of whoops and cries
goes on beyond the bright lines of his door,
he prays for the lion.

ODE TO MY DIXON TICONDEROGA 1388 NO. 2

The first pleasure
is the deep pleasure of delay:

the plain form waiting
straight and yellow, lying
perpendicular to the edge
of my cleared desk. I sit
listening to its Quaker moment,
its old soul not set to any purpose.

Just how long should I wait
to take it in my hand
for the second pleasure which is
the pleasure of its sharpening?
That cedar shaft, dried
at a white-hot heat,
forced by my dome
sharpener to make a fine point
under pressure –

yielding to the third pleasure,
the strange joy of exposing
its resin-fused core,
that stick used to carbonize
the brains of poets and
the manifesto of the common man
who mines the graphite
near Los Pozos, Guanajuato.

The fourth pleasure, the physical
word, like Jehovah's name,
is not to be written.

So right to the fifth
and final pleasure, the one allowing

for my hand's unplanned errors:
the most amazing pink eraser
sitting firmly crowned, crimped
into the green and gold ferule.
This pink eraser – oh God has never
made anything more pure.

BUILDING A MAN

THE FIRST DAY

My first task is separation:
light from dark, land from air, the white stork
from the whale. Then, him.
I'll place light in his right hand, dark
in his left. When those hands come together
even I will tremble. And land will be there
in his shoulders, and air in his eyelids,
the white stork migrating from heart to head,
in his skull the speaking whale.

THE SECOND DAY

The smooth surface of his skin will be tattooed
with the word "revelation." It will hurt,
he'll keep his eyelids closed, his lips
closed tight. When the day is done, he'll open
his right hand and find in its design
"someday." In the left – "never."
When he shakes the left hand, poetry
will fall, freezing everything. When he shakes
the right, he'll hear a river.

THE THIRD DAY

For each hair on his body, a different shading
of shame: derision, awe, humiliation.
This is a flawed plan from a mean mind —
I myself am ashamed.

THE FOURTH DAY

I'll teach him to build a model
of the white stork flying. I'll teach him
about the bones of its wings – the elongated humerus,
the radius and ulna – all corresponding
to the bones of his own arms, so that the arc
from heart to head might be more than a fluttering,
might be understood. I won't teach him how
to consider the danger. When he jumps
from great heights, he'll fly by faith
and by the great beauty of skeletons.

THE FIFTH DAY

I'll put a pen into each hand, the dark hand
and the light – he'll teach each hand
to draw, he'll fill worlds trying to see me.

THE SIXTH DAY

He learns this day about excess
and the drawing of blood, vinegar-soaked stalks
lifted to the lips, the engineering of ropes
meant to pull machinery up from the dirt.
The whale will fill with dry grasses this day
and will thicken, so the stork can turn
back to the nest again, back to the heart.

THE SEVENTH DAY

This is the day of pleasure.
I'll give him a canopy, many pillows, I'll summon angels
around him, I'll become the air over his eyelids,
I'll let him dream so I don't have to speak.
I'll create the *bosem* — mint, dill, gabanum, spikenard, cassia –
and I'll finish this man.
Then I'll imagine spices into being,
toss the Pleiades into the sky. All these
will be part of him: the stars, the scent of gingergrass
and cinnamon, the cypress harp played gladly,
the timbrel played with both hands at the feast.

Gary Fincke

THE BRAIN SHELTER

Almost always, in the saved-brain movies,
Someone smart or evil needs a body.
They have heads; we recognize their faces;
The surgeons search for the young and pretty.
But those brains without a skull, what of them?
Only when the sauce they're kept in bubbles
Do we know they're thinking hard about odds,
Angry, aroused, or in despair over
The difficulties of disembodied faith.

In England, inside an old bomb shelter,
Eight thousand brains float in formaldehyde,
And we know, touring the display so near
A psychiatric hospital, past wards
Of patients are arranged here, their brains bought
For candy or a shopping spree for toys.
Alzheimers, we read, schizophrenia,
Parkinsons, Pick's disease, repetitive
Concussions from padded fists. Look, we hear,
This brain is shriveled, this one is compressed,
Two of the thousand shapes for the mind gone wrong.

It's enough to spark the old words for loss:
Moron, dufus, imbecile, we begin;
Idiot and loony, fuckup, goofball,
Nut case, shell shocked, or the complexity
Of gradual loss, my friend describing
The dark spots on his MRI, places
Where nothing will return to remind him
Of the small, automatic ways to move,
Where he stared and stared, expecting something
In the night sky of his brain, if only
The conditions were right as he squinted
While the doctor declared, "See? There?" as if
Those words were double-entendre for repair.

Anne Marie Macari

VERMONT TREES

Below birds crossing the lake of the sky
and purple martins on power lines, down
to the trees and one thing my brother said
that stays with me from Long Island to Vermont,
something about trees being conductors
of spirit, such bloody light they draw
toward themselves, toward us, into fields
and planted rows, like the old oak that looks
exhausted and smells of fire twisting through
its trunk and into its skirt of roots.
What it holds up, what it does for us,
we'll never know. Not while trucks speed past
white houses and a man biting a cigar
shoves suitcases into his trunk, never
looking up at the ropes in the sky,
never noticing who is drowning in air.
Who can fathom the steadfastness of trees,
or see them for what they are in their ethereal
robes, or get past our unspoken envy
for the pure light that changes them till
they're speaking, the wind coming up from below
to loosen their tongues, each tree swaying:
honey locusts, willow, apple, the clefts
in their backs bearing up against rot,
their leaves deep green. Would anyone guess
that in these woods there were once trees
three people could link themselves around?
Old as that, so I feel, I'm sure I feel,
something missing when we hike across the farm
and into the forest. Some gaping loss singing sweetly,
too sweet, all around us while we climb,
out of breath and dizzy, some hole at my back
when we stop to catch the view—Vermont
to New York, we're that high—
mountain ranges stained violet and receding
into the horizon, and still there's no reconciling

that I'm an epidemic, scavenger, death threat,
even though I leave the apples on their branches
and try to step around the moss into this air heavy
with summer: late August when wind and blood
change direction and we head for
the final adornments, pine cones like bells,
whole mountainsides of them ringing
from their tall green steeples.

Roy Jacobstein

FREE HERMIT CRAB

—or light, the relic of farewells...
—Wallace Stevens

Under the left half
of the moon, fish-smell
comes in on the sea,
in on long green ribbons
like a childhood hour.

You want to blend in
with the men dangling
lines on the pier,
but everywhere the signs
shout *difference*:

undulating anchors
on blue-collar biceps,
tough white guys
singing black blues
beneath the ratty palms,

QWIK MART—no,
KWIK, Say YES
To JESUS, Pleasure
Island Plaza, Jubilee
Amusement Park

(each night a clown,
orange hair igniting the sky,
gives every child under ten
a free hermit crab).
Soon the sun will hover

like a Sunday wafer
before a pious mouth.
Maybe you'll try
the grits, grit
your teeth, a sort of

risor sardonicus, mimicking
the black-faced gulls
squawking overhead,
or better yet, find yourself
some clean spit of sand

where an empty shell
or pack of Luckies
might shelter
your two pincers,
your other bony legs.

Dolsy Smith

Four Poems

DEAR _____,

Spring is here, and waxy. It drips
from sidewalk planters, like purple
and white paraffin. It collects in my
eyes and ears, under my nails.

Our street is only as steep as you
remember. The new houses have not
yet tipped it over.

Every day I read the weather page
in the paper. It is sunny where you
are, always. But I forecast storms
in the maps of my fingertips.

Tomorrow is Monday. I must brunch
at the Natural History Museum,
with the Cro-Magnons in their dark
papier-mache cave.

Have the nuns from the convent
changed into swallows?
Their inquisition clouds the fields.

I rearrange the vowels in your old
letter, like paleontology. You'd be
surprised at how many species
of you I have discovered. I still
wear the Queen Elizabeth air-mail
stamp as my tattoo.

I will mail this tomorrow. Evening
already leavens the distance
down the roads.

ENNUI OF THE PLEISTOCENE

A glacier has moved in with us,
crushing the black forest of dining room
furniture, no doubt watermarking
the Persian rug beyond repair. And where
is the cat? Our friends all commend our
decorator, as they shave off fresh rime
for their cocktails. We cannot tell them
the truth.

We cannot keep the thermostat high
enough. Nights encamped under blankets
we wake by turns to whines, a crackling
like a roomful of circus freaks eating
glass. By morning the moraine
in our hall is bigger. I told you so,
you chide, the glacier grows like
a child.

Your mother drops by to read
your tea leaves. Her head bobbing
like a puffin, perhaps she tells you
I have cheated. Our old friends stop
visiting; too many coats and umbrellas
vanished into crevasses. But new guests
crowd in, geologists—one of them
an ex of yours. The place dangles
with gauges like spiny Christmas
ornaments.

Your steps are agile now
among the till, your laugh splinters
an avalanche onto my head
while I work. Sunset drops through it,
stoking fire behind this slow engine
of needles and bone. Can I carve space
enough in time? Our new house
should soon be ready. Fluted ceilings,
furniture from a glassworks, rooms
and rooms of glare.

OCTOBER

The trees flare and burn
with change. Bright red has

spread through this one's edge
overnight as arson. These smolder

a wispy melon-yellow, dropping
tiny curled leaves at our feet. No,

I do not know their names.

Everywhere the silkworms have laid
a sticky scaffolding. We brush off

our mouths and eyes. You say you can
smell leaves burning in the air; maybe

you're just testing me again. But what

is the wind building in the pilot-light
sky, in our clothes, between

our hands? You look away. I've found
this splotchy maple leaf, big

as a burned-up bird, an old map
of the cold. You turn back,

rubbing goose-pimpled arms.
I walk on into dusk, waiting

for my right hand to catch blue fire.

I remember: in a field someone stumbles
upon a half-rotten squash in the weeds

like a fat stash of gold.

TOUR

Lost. All we have is half a map
of the moon. We're on our way
to the Museum of Famous
Last Words, big dark barn
somewhere in these white woods.

Our tour guide, the acclaimed
Hungarian somnambulist, was caught
peeking. They took him away.

A fat businessman from Georgia
boasts that he can find his own
way. His head pink as a match,
he bobs off into cobwebbed leaves.

The rest of us demur.
After all, we are but guests
of the landscape.

Madame H. has brought a life-raft.
Hardly enough mouthfuls
of yellow rubber to go round.

Some of us are for walking
in circles; others suggest
that we huddle together
and cry. But are we
permitted to be homesick?

Beware the man in cold boots!
His red handle-bar mustache
like drooping wings. He steals
through the deepening woods,
a pale needle. You
do not hear his coming.

How many of us
are having this nightmare?
Let us persecute them.

Jay Nebel

MY BEST FRIEND'S BODY

I remember how the street was alive
After dark, and how swiftly the lights rose
Into the sky, hot and blazing above us;
How I held my hands against the small
Of her back. The ambulance meanwhile
That rode through the neighborhood,
Cradled my best friend, whether I heard it,
Held its lonely melody, I cannot remember.
Forgive me. I knew nothing about love.

Her skin, in the shadows, untouched,
Virginal: how my friend's body must have felt
To the paramedic moving his hands
Like wings. This too, an act
Of love. But I was not aware of this.
Only her cries as I moved above her
In the dark, the occasional rustle of leaves.

How beautiful we must have looked
Together, moving into one another and apart,
Perfectly timed, in unison; how my friend's body
Rose to meet the medic's hands. Victims,
Or so we say, of circumstance—
How we wanted it, and after, how I offered
My shirt and kissed her forehead; even this,
I would later learn, a signal of leaving; how she lay
There as my friend must have, trembling, uncertain,
And awake beneath the thin covers and the light.

THE EASTER EGG

Six months later we dislodged it
from under the piano. Irregular as a heart
on wheels, it radiated no air of resurrection.
In fact, it resembled a golf ball come undone,

a rubbery core of tar and twine
that smelled of something slightly burned.
Who knows which child dipped the egg for how long
into colored water? Did we think about God

or life and death? Someone hid it, that much we know,
and someone else poked the broom, and there
it was—no painted shell—black as a note
escaping music. It wobbled under the broken

pedal and skittered across the hardwood floor.
We might have easily mistaken it for a hairball
or a dead mouse. Two cat-eye marbles
rolled out behind, disciples looking for a sign.

RESEARCH

Whether the rats are sleeping or eating
or pissing onto the arts
and leisure section of the *New York Times*,
our job is to tickle them. Seven times

a day we stick our piano fingers through
the bars and play rodent jazz
on their backs, jiggle Mingus
into their armpits, riffle the white hairs

under their chins with Miles.
Mostly, we're undergrads and
the rats seem to know it. They tolerate
our bumbling notes, but I think they sense

we're distracted. We're always sweating
mid-term deadlines, writing papers in our heads.
They twitter and chortle loudest for the old
woman who works Sundays. Her final

coda was eighth grade, but they seem to prefer her
hands callused and chapped from scrubbing
the toilets of our professor's home,
the way she lowers herself

to the cages and gazes into
their eyes, singing hymns
while we amplify and collect
the sound rats make when they laugh.

Floyd Skloot

A HAND OF CASINO, 1954

My grandfather studies the cards.
His jaw juts and he begins to shift
the pink plate of his false teeth,
tonguing it out and in, mouth
widening till his grin has flipped
upside-down between the gums.
He slams a deuce onto the table.

Even at seven I know he is losing
on purpose. He mumbles deep
in his throat, a gargle of sounds
like someone choking on stones.
I think he would make sense
if his teeth were put in right.

At seven I also know that bodies
crumble but new parts can come
gleaming from dark hiding places.
I have seen, buried at the back
of his top drawer, my father's spare
glass eye in a navy velvet box.
My mother has three heads
of stiff hair inside her closet,
just in case, and a secret pack
of fingernails in her chiffonier.

My grandfather strings phrases
of Polish and Yiddish around words
in French to hold his broken
English together. I understand
nothing he says but everything
that is in his eyes. He tells me
he is *a man from the world*.
That must be where he learned
that losing is winning as a frown

is a smile and a curse is a kiss.
When I lay down the good
deuce, he smacks his furrowed
brow and curses high heaven.

Oliver Rice

THE ANIMAL OF MIND

strays
 out of the badlands,
down a coulee to the creek bed,

naming
 the sand willow, the plover,
the spider web, the prairie gentian,

 and itself,
 oblique,
 discontent,

listening
 to the locusts, the sedge,
the silence that is not silent,

 intimations
 of syllogism,
 of metaphor,

watching
 the bitterroot, the snails,
the stillness that is not still.

I'LL MARRY

I'll marry again, no doubt—
marry doubt, marry heartache.
I'll marry shipwreck, and the dragging
hook, and the weeds they pull up
instead of the drowned.
I'll marry divorce, and the paper
on which it's decreed, and the judge
with his watery eyes wishing us both
well; I'll marry heartbreak, that peculiar
affliction, cousin to papercut, cousin
to open lips, to spread legs, to jasmine
and jazz. I'll marry time and time again,
no doubt—marry Christ, and the last
breath of Christ, and the waning ghost
of Christ; marry the ebbing tide, my son
in a small boat rowing away from shore,
this thin back, his straight spine, the light
that blesses his journey, the black
cloud spreading its wings to engulf
him; I'll marry beauty and the disease
that kills it, need and what fills it,
and what hollows it, and the shallows,
and what runs aground there—love,
with its curved prow, its rusted bell.

HUNGRY AGAIN

I once taught a girl how to be hungry
again—she'd forgotten; having effaced
her hunger for so long by tricking herself
out of the trick of desire. She'd become
a collection of long bones in a calfskin sack,
mouth like a lamprey with its circle of sharp
teeth, hair on her cheeks and back like moss
muffling a tree stump. Being a bone-person,
she was nearly mean—no cordiality, as grace
is flesh-born. I don't remember how I taught
her to reach into desirelessness to find desire—
like plunging one's hand into black water
and pulling out a fish with a wedding ring
in its mouth. What I can recall is sitting together
on the floor of the dining room eating dried sugared
pineapple with our hands. A bit of rice squeezed
into a sticky ball. Praying over the food; keeping
our eyes shut as we chewed and tasted; her tears
as she swallowed. When I was a teenager, the white mare
next door was starved by her master. Her soft black lips
dripped foam but she would not take the apple
I held out to her in the flat of my hand. We called
the authorities, but sometimes it's too late. So many
years later, having given up those two dangerous occupations—
teaching the skeletal, I mean, and courting desire—I find myself
mean, impolite, starving. It takes all that's left of me to bury
my lips in your hand, to taste the sugar there.

ANOTHER MYSTERY

She begins to screen the sun out.
Windows allowed to dust over—
become murky like reflections on a pond.

She paints the doors stuck.
Her only friend, a crazy mutt
whose stuttered howls come out in odd noises
like a dog's misery over a master's death.

On circled days, a kind man delivers charity
in a bag of mysteries. Pages, places
she opens and breathes in. A turn and she is

a bathtub victim, hair fan-like in a magenta pool.
Around the paragraphs, her mind puzzles on "d's"
detective-door-death, decembers lost
between dust jackets. A few daisies remain

in the backyard like a fragrance in the folds
of an old pocketbook. She's color blind by now
and always hungry. But once in awhile,

when the moon wears mother-of-pearl
bracelets and wind rattles branches
code-like on the roof, eyes tired, neck kinked
from ten-thousand pages, she sorts through the past

like a young girl in a ribbon drawer...
waves powdered with sundust, delicious sea air rising
and tangling her hair, the cottonwoods fanning

the man in the shade. And she, brown and restless
as a gypsy, rubs oil on his burnt, freckled shoulders.
His head tilts back as she bends over
to brush his forehead with a momentary kiss.

And life, never better, more real.

AFTER MENTIONING A NURSING HOME

It doesn't matter why or how
it was said, only what
I saw in her eyes.

I worry it step by step
like a child waiting
to be rescued from a lie.

There is the couch she sat on,
the yellow walls, the stained dress she wore,
the trust, the sour air.

What was I thinking?
I remember once reading of an island
where criminals were sent

after love had twisted,
coiled back, and bit the heart.
The incident lasted no longer

than the time it takes to slap
the nuisance of a fly,
or clear the throat

before swearing a solemn promise,
but the words spilled that day
like a threat in a small room

of the family home. Words not meant
to wound an old woman, who by now
has moved slowly to the edge of the stairway.

FINDING THE ENDING

She began dying on my birthday.
When her eyes opened, they were blank,
yoke-like and spoiled. Nurses bathed her
as she stared, immodest, out the window.

Two men in a tree are watching, she whispered.
Once I read that the dead come for the dying.
I fought back, told her I would make them leave.

She shook her head as if they might turn to me.
For three weeks, I banged my head against reason
and tried to pull her back. Her chest heaved,

worked too hard and I thought of summers at the lake
when caught fish were thrown on the dock
and how they suffered the air. It took thirty years
before I would taste fish. Is that how memory works?

In time I knew she was leaving. I imaged the soul
leaving the body like the picture I pasted by her bed:
a flurry of fireworks, sparks shooting green and red,

fizzling slivers of color into an avenue of planets.
It was then I lied, told her dying was like that, as if
wishes were solid as stones and I could arrange them.

Relatives and nurses stopped and studied the magazine ad.
A bottle of gin shooting fireworks into a bluing,
star-flooded sky. The profile of the moon's face lit,

familiar as a distant cousin. The earthened trees
beneath, dark, significant as ink blots.
A red explosion rising in the shape of a perfect aster,

an atom splitting, or the core of a soul. Even now
when I feel abandoned, I stare at the picture
and imagine her there, waiting to be reborn.

Jennifer Kronovet

FOR YOUR BIRTHDAY: A SAINT

You'll find him holding
a small house – death
as it collapsed his ribs
around his heart. Sworn to
the indoors – the light
on specks of dust as they
pass the window, a change
in weather unsensed until
it beats on the roof: inside,
he could live inside his body.

He was young. The chair,
the bed, the pen marks,
the lamp. To keep a life
within a house – breathing
thresholds, pulse of stairs –
he imagined movement within
the walls, xylem and phloem
to circulate his thoughts
of clouds into the care it takes
to put everything away, to save
dead moths in a box, fold
shirts, necks against backs.

In leaving was the death
he dreaded, not, as ceiling
and floor met, the windows
unhinging, landing whole
outside, framing
the ground, and sky.

About Our Contributors

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LEN ROBERTS lives in Hellertown, Pennsylvania. His most recent book is *The Trouble-Making Finch* (University of Illinois Press, 1998).

JIM PETERSON lives in Lynchburg, Virginia. His third book, *The Owning Stone*, has just won the Benjamin Saltman Poetry Award and will be published by Red Hen Press this year.

DONALD PLATT teaches at the State University of West Georgia. Purdue University Press published his *Fresh Peaches, Fireworks, & Guns* in 1994. The Center for Book Arts in New York City has just published his chapbook *Leap Second at the Turn of the Millennium*.

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Poetry Northwest Prize Awards, 2000

MACLEOD-GROBE PRIZE: \$500

John Bensko for Two Poems (Spring 1999)
and Three Poems (Winter 1999-2000)

BULLIS-KIZER PRIZE: \$200

Tina Kelley for Two Poems (Spring 1999)

THEODORE ROETHKE PRIZE: \$200

John Bargowski for Four Poems (Autumn 1999)

RICHARD HUGO PRIZE: \$200

Jane Bailey for Four Poems (Spring 1999)

