

Poetry

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POETRY NORTHWEST

SPRING 2002

Jesse Lee Kercheval

Three Poems

BANG

This is what will happen—
you will step from your cab
& your dog
will be so excited he will pee on your new Italian shoes.
Your sister—a woman
with neither pets nor children
whom you left
in charge of both—
will weep she's so delighted
you are back
& soon she can go home.
Your three year old
will jump up
to hug you and knock
your glasses off.

This is what you'll hear—
your sister telling you
she mangled the front bumper
on your new car,
your daughter
asking what you brought her,
your son saying

he really really missed you,
the crunching sound
of the family dog eating
your bifocals.

& you will wish
you were back in Italy
at the film festival
watching silent movies.
You will have a strong
desire to stick your fingers
in your ears.

Don't. Instead
imagine you are Kate Bruce,
the kindly mother
in nearly every Griffith short.
Smile as only she could—
then open your arms wide
and welcome in
your life.

FAMILIARITY, MY HUSBAND

One morning in
the small Italian town
where we're staying,
you discover the church door open.
Inside we find the body
of Saint Gregory,
his bones dressed
in embroidered satin
& we can't help comparing him
to the other saints
we've seen in our travels:
Santa Lucia with her heap
of eyeglasses in Venice,

Mother Cabrini marooned
in the upper reaches of Manhattan,
St. Boniface, unfamous
apostle to the Germans.

Like the explorer
Sir Richard Burton—
we take ourselves with us
everywhere we go.
He traveled
all five continents,
learned a hundred languages.
By the time he wrote
his final book on Iceland
every rock he saw
was the shadow of a dozen others,
every word
had ten synonyms
in his cacophony of language.

In the end,
no one could understand
a thing he said
—not his most ardent reader
—not his wife Isabel who rarely traveled.

No one except God. One can always
hope for God.

*&—I count my blessings—
I have you, too.*

At least for this life;
at least for now.

STEAM

Cinema Muto

Mute

Silent—*Shhh*

No one here will tell

about the two silent film scholars
who sat through hours of screenings
at this Italian film festival

their heads together

Someone says—*she's divorced but I think there are children*
Someone says—*he's married but he says they're having problems.*
Someone says—*but men always say that don't they?*

We have so little gossip really
our transgression limited to

who fell asleep mid-movie
(bam! His notebook hit the floor)

who is eating in the theatre
(chips! Such a vivid *crunching*)

She's an archivist from Washington DC
He's a professor at a college in Ohio

Each night, they go back to separate hotels
in separate nearby towns

Until the last night, on the special steam train
laid in for the convention,

they start kissing
as if they were starving peasants eating

& we watch
as if we were famished too

Until, in a rush of steam, she disembarks
& he stays on, headed for a flight back to Ohio

As the train pulls out, she runs along the platform
he leans out the window waving madly

It should have been a silent movie,
someone says, sighing loudly

but for that—as for many things—
this night has come too late.

Oliver Rice

REALITY HAS SEIZED THE WORLD

Across the court, someone practices a plaintive oboe.

•
In the box of disregarded ideas,
of banal untimely disreputable ideas,
the zeitgeist is at work
and the hippocampus.

In the drawer of inoperative ideas,
of graceless inexpedient untutored ideas,
the moral will nests among absurdities
and malformations of the heart,

among fragments of allegory
and old wisdom,

of syllogism and myth
and pure possibility,

of doubt and carnal muddle
and unexplained childhood.

•
All night the melting snow drips from the balcony.

Michael Atkinson

THE NEW WORLD SYMPHONY

And then I was born,

the white oaks in my family's yard splitting into two necks
and lifting up the driveway in hunks like the angry dead
busting out of a grave,
my parents breaking dining room chairs
over each other's head, the ten thousand cats
making bread in my infant hair,
and while I learned to roll over
onto my stomach and from there scream helplessly,

the French lost Vietnam to us in a single throw of odds-evens
and Pacific islands no one ever named vanished
under waves that wouldn't knock over a five-year old.

The moon took a footprint kiss and shrugged.

Wars and orgies, other people went;
the schools, the schools, the schools,
from their windows the least cozy suburban shack,
naked in the sun or chocolated in shade,
looked like Red Riding Hood's grandma's forest cottage,

but instead our days—how few of them,
only 90-odd days in my ninth spring, all
of them sucked through and burnt down like butt-ends.

As if that weren't enough, Saturday afternoons were garroted
by catechism, a lustrous liberal-arts coed teacher
wrestling with the Catholic paradox:
"We're supposed to love Him *and* fear Him, the Bible says.
I don't really understand how."

She stood with one hand questioning, her long clean hair
draping over her shoulders like photographed water,

her full, bra-less breasts filling her T-shirt
with their ruckling details.
I loved and feared her body, and myself,
I loved and feared the day my hands
would ease under a shirt like hers and find
the second sun we see with our fingers,
softer, cleaner than ten thousand prayers.

That was 1973, and I imagined her going back to college,
undressing
with the boy who loved her in a lazy afternoon dorm,
sacrificing her resources to him in autumn window light
they'd both compare life to for 50 years running.

It's light I had to imagine, of course, and light I imagine still.

Somehow, a few decades got lost in the paperwork,
and the world as I see it, awakening,
is hardly up to my dreams—
the waving maple leaves die every year, in a cycle of
half-baked promises
and inevitable desiccation;
oceans still wash up our trash rather than swallow it,
music is good only for dancing, bicycles only for infrequent
pledges of exercise.
The box turtles have left Long Island,
and the tree frogs, trilling sirens in the summer midnight,
remain a myth, unseen but deafening.

There is nowhere on this sweet, monstrous planet
where I could stand on its edge
and witness the pageant storm beneath me;
wherever we are, we see only the searchlighting
fan of our own azimuth, or at least to across the street, where
neighbors' homes, I've learned, aren't nearly as unafflicted
as they seem from the darkened curb.

Wherever you go, it's all about when you return,
what sort of husband or father you are, or I am,
and perhaps worst of all, the cathedralated realities

erected in the misty swamps of the skull by movies or music
or language
no longer hold firm—
visiting, I can no longer detrain
in a Fordean Ireland or a Mizoguchian forest or
a 70s American dusty Depression-era Alabama, its secret roads
running with moonshiners and paunchy lawmen,
or a Pink Floydian ether-state, or a Dickensian alleyway
or a Pynchonian Malta, cynically sipping port
as the revolution roars elsewhere in the city.

Welcome to my desk, welcome to Main Street,
around the corner, up the drive, to the lawn,
the door, the toilet receiving my fermented detonations.

Of course I adore my wife, she who chose to accompany me
to the grave,
and my three children, who are my walking, talking response
to the world's miscarriages and shortfalls,
so fiery in my heart's retina they threaten to raze
my temple of What Is.

The rest of it? I'll live it out,
wish for more on the last day,
but I just want to say I've waited for reports
of something finer, something cleaner,
and so far, all I've heard was the weather.
This late September is cold, and we are unseasonably alone.

MR. MALAPROP

I know when I order
the veal couplet for lunch
all bets are off.
I've caught myself
picking sonnet out of my nose,
witnessing epileptic caesuras,
having peanut butter and enjambment
sandwiches. How many times
can I say
I am I am I am
before the quatrain leaves the station?
Where are the heroes and villanelles?
Anyone for a game of troche?
The worst thing is I rarely realize
I've made the substitution,
I who was a child prosody,
now suffering from anapestic shock,
writing poems with so many
aberrant lions, roaring
in anaphylactic tetrameter!

IN A RUT

She dogs me while
I try to take a catnap.
Of course, I'm playing possum but
I can feel her watching me,
eagle-eyed, like a hawk.
She snakes over to my side
of the bed, and continues to
badger me. I may be a rat, but
I won't let her get my goat.
I refuse to make an
ass of myself, no matter
how mulish I feel.
I'm trying to make a
bee-line for sleep, but
You're a turkey! she says, and
I'm thinking she's no
spring chicken. She is a busy beaver,
though, always trying to ferret
things out. She's a bit batty,
in fact, a bit cuckoo, but
What's your beef, now? I say.
*Get your head out
of the sand,* she replies. *What
are you—a man, or a mouse?*
That's a lot of bull, I think;
she can be a real bear.
Don't horse around, now, she says.
You know you can't weasel out of it!
She's having a whale of a time,
thinking she's got me skunked, thinking
that she's out-foxed me.
But I know she's just crying wolf,
and I won't be cowed. Feeling
my oats now, I merely look sheepish;
I give her the hang-dog look;
I give her the lion's share.
I give her something; to crow about.
Oh, lovey-dove, I intone.
We're all odd ducks, strange

birds; this won't be my swan-song, after all. She's in hog-heaven now, ready to pig-out. *Oh, my stallion*, she says, *Oh, my lambkin!* You are a real animal, you know!

IT HAPPENS

And who is ever ready
when it does? On the deck,
for instance, at Turtle's Restaurant,
Siesta Key, just down
from Crescent Beach.
Sunset. The pelicans and egrets
roosting under the inlet moon.
At the next table, the breeze,
seated between Mssrs. Gentle & Waft,
talks of his dear wife, Hush.
We sit dreamy in the aftermath
of salmon and red snapper,
in the light of the key lime pie,
when, sudden as a dropped
dish in the kitchen, your
startled face shatters, and
the moment we will all live with
the rest of our lives, sidles up
unexpectedly, and presents the check.

J.R. Solonche

Three Poems

IN THE BOOKSTORE I FOUND A BOOK

In the bookstore I found a book
with the title *Ten Poems That Could
Change Your Life*. I was intrigued,
so I took the book from the shelf,
and I opened it, at random, to "Ode
to my Socks" by Pablo Neruda. As
soon as I finished reading it, my life
changed. I began to think in Spanish,
a language I had learned in high school
and then quickly forgot. I began
to consider my clothes. I looked at
my shoes, twin brown hairless
mammals on my feet, and of course,
my socks, which seemed to blush with
shame as I compared them to his
hand-made woolen ones. Then I
considered my trousers and my pockets
and what I had in my pockets, my wallet,
my keys, my loose change. I considered
my belt and my shirt and my jacket.
I knew the Spanish for all of them,
amazingly, for my life had changed.
So I didn't buy the book. I didn't need to.
My life had changed. I was Pablo Neruda,
and I took my new life with me as I walked
out of the bookstore, leaving my old life there,
on the floor, next to the penny I had dropped
while considering my loose change.

AT A READING

After the last poem,
the poet, clearly drunk,
answered questions.
A student asked him
how he made a poem.
There was a wide smile
and a long silence.
Then, "Fuck the muse
and wait nine hours."
There was laughter,
some embarrassed,
some self-consciously loud.
Then the student said,
"But Mr. C_____,
according to that metaphor,
isn't it the muse who makes
the poem and not the poet?"
There was a narrow
smile and a short silence.
"True enough, but poetry
has always been a messy
business," he said, a drop
of spittle dangling from
the corner of his mouth.

CROSSING

I wait at the crossing.
I begin to count the cars.

I get to 55, one for each year of my life.
I stop counting.

I close my eyes.
I keep my eyes closed until the bell sounds.

I keep my eyes closed until the gate opens.
I start my car.

I cross.
I do not look at the train disappearing.

I look straight ahead.
I have invented a new superstition.

Kevin Craft

SLEEPING DOGS

Their legs all itch,
paws scratching at
the warm pine floor
which, to them, is a big wood
riddled with small wild game.
They snarl and whine,
their breathing labored,
something they can't
quite catch. The strangers
at the fence, the curious
stench of moldering crab
curled up in a wet nostril,
low-tide, an open stretch
of gull-speckled beach...
In the end you want
to lie down with them,
to brave the animal
kingdom come
slumbering into the room, hand
to mouth, nose
to the ground, the wind
a clean bone
you thought was gone forever.

Kirsten Tracy

URBAN ANIMALS

I learned about Chara, an Asian elephant
wandering the streets of Bangkok
hungry for bananas, then about
Barbara, pulling the big tent up,
wearing a headdress with her named spelled
in sequins, held in place by her
big ears. I learned this because PBS
wanted me to know about misery and
Shirley—alone in Louisiana, tucked
in a zoo. Twenty-two years of
foot chains and hose baths. "Elephants
need other elephants," said the expert, her
lab coat buttoned tight, her purple collar
crushed against her skin. What was
the point? My new lover asked me as
I recounted the documentary and
cried. He feels that TV eats
my sensitive heart the way boric acid
eats through the beetle's thorax. This
is an unexpected example because my lover knows
nothing about bugs, rather, he loves
Foucault. Nights like this I sometimes wish
I had an entomologist to curl up with, to ask
about the dangers I myself might pose
to exoskeletons. But tonight I just want
to curl up and finish this poem, to
forget the urban elephants and arrive
at something that makes me feel
good. Luckily, I think I can do that. I
think I can take my conscience out for
waffles and sit in a comfortable booth and not
feel the universe pinch me with
its guilt. The waffles can feel light
as pastries, and the women who
bring them to me on brown trays can move

perfectly through the air to deliver them
warm, their hips—always extraordinary,
the kind that children slide out of merrily
and go to school—swinging softly. Full grown,
I still go to school—a happy biped stepping down stairs
to open my classroom door and
teach from behind a plastic desk. And it
so happens that the sheet-rocked walls
are painted mint green and in this box I
talk about words and get away from every
animal floundering. Where I walk is not the
hen house floor, chicken wire holding
me in my basket. How I travel is not
through water, hook and net sweeping
the deep sea to clip me. Where happiness
arrives, the universe and I have a
mutual understanding. I get to live
my life with this brain and thousands of one
dollar bills, which I can use however—
I can toss peanuts to the elephants or just
get into my car, my long arms steering, and drive
and, choice after choice, feel the skin
wall of my body or not.

THE DAY

Turning onto our street, I watch for the lights
 we left on this morning, and think how the darkness,
 arriving ahead of us, is spectacular

as the leaf one of us will track into the house this evening,
 carrying the mail or bringing the dog,
 not yet seeing how the yard has drifted

closed, or the perilous flights of birds from cold
 nest to cold ground, or the snow, melted and freezing
 on the porch steps by early afternoon.

Closing my office door, I was not thinking of the living room
 window bare of reflection where children
 glance, walking from school.

I was not thinking of the drive ahead of me, or you,
 or the music, a Renaissance harp, I would hear as traffic
 slowed and snow iced the windshield

hours ago, by now
 having noticed the leaf shard's gleam like an animal's
 eye, looking up—

by now having leaned close to catch the broken edge
 with a fingernail, and seeing the stratum
 and multitude.

SPECTRAL

*Look up, my husband said.
 If we were in a twelfth century play,
 this show of light
 would have something to do with us
 and God—*

*Look up, he said, as if to make
 apparent what we think
 is ordinary: sequence of shadow
 and branch, darkness
 and light, light without mercy.*

TWIN

*Not her voice. Not snow
 covering stones. Not the glasses of milk she drank.
 Not the shape of her mouth.*

For years, made to sleep in one bed,
 we watched light break the room into edges

our hands learned to follow
 like the nightgowns we pulled, curled on our sides,

down over our feet.
 We knew that the world would end with light,

that pain would inhabit the body,
 that the mind would forget its one resemblance.

NOCTURNE

(Penelope & Ulysses)

When she heard the cold metal *snick* of side
Door she had already been lying there
Patiently in the dry bed like a mate

Hungry lioness on some forgotten stretch
Of sand, her tail ribboning down & up,
And as far as she was concerned he was

Away on business, making deals over
Feasts, reveling in their life's stories how
Elated he was with her, how she made

Him feel about himself, made him feel like
Some warrior prince aflame with guile,
Devoted, eager with hunt, mastering

The skills of his weaponry, copying
The gait of her animal, her open
Terrain of scent, of thrown trees & moist scrub,

The entire anatomy of her pride.
As far as he was concerned she was
Out uncompromisingly like her light,

Her body ivory, frozen, looming in the
Dark, limbs banded, drawn up into herself,
A monument to distance, her vault too

Steep, too vast for the wanderings he'd done
Most nights, circling in his smoky-lit
Bars, locating dirt-splattered pads & street-

Light tracks, well shadowed for easiest prey,
All ears & eyes prone for any heat-edged
Tigress or swift-hipped springbok which uncaged

Themselves, wildly devouring so many,
Often whole and raw, the hunt's guarantee,
Until he's all thumbs, covering his tracks,

To return to his threshold a seasoned
Man, one who'd wait quietly beside some
Wounded animal where a trophy should be.

VEIL

Dear _____ they always begin with regrets to inform you
So many letters now inside this box of bellied cardboard
That you did not we cannot you will not we must you should
Full of such apologies for having to apologize most often
Copied on shock white paper to express how their sorrow
Pales in comparison to yours but some choose to brighten
Your loss with swarms of color corals goldenrods perhaps
Fine showgirls presenting a fast number for this funeral
At the box of the already laid out and so we hope we wish
But know you have our deepest thanks for thinking of us
In this time of grief of funding cuts of keen competition
Meaning of course you could try again poor bridesmaid
So be persistent pushing ever onward toward that veil
Which outwits which one day might be sincerely yours

Nancy Carol Moody

EROS

Pallor of ash, homely as a potato,
the asteroid named Eros tumbles
end-over-end in its loopy orbit
around the sun. For a year

the space probe, flimsy cylinder
of foil and shields, has been courting
the rock, making its passes, circling
closer, spawning photos it sends

one hundred ninety-six million
miles to Earth. But now the probe's
batteries are running down, the satellite
spent beyond usefulness. Two days

short of Valentine's, it makes the plunge
to the rock's cratered surface where, despite
all predictions and the uncertain perils
of proximity, the probe continues

its lonely habit, the camera shuttering
glimpses of a geography unfathomed.
Marooned on the lovely and windless
plains of Eros, unable to align its panels

to the sun, the probe at best can survive
a month before its snapshots dim
finally into dusk, that delicate, moonlit
darkness where honeymoons begin.

Jeanne Lohmann

PITTOSPORUM

In the schoolyard garden the scarecrow's beet-shaped head
is wrapped in burlap, straw leaks
from his denim sleeve-ends, a pen oddly
in his pocket, though he is oblivious
to this growing season or any other,
and will take no notes
on the progress of strawberries,
sweet corn, the wandering rows of lettuce
and garlic. *The notes for the poem are*
the only poem, Adrienne Rich said, notes I keep
in trust, as orange-blossom fragrance
of pittosporum rises
from the dense green hedge beside the path,
and I remember you liked the smell that followed us
out of the park. Coming home
to check the *Guide to Shrubs and Trees*, we learned
that all varieties are evergreen,
some resistant to drought, and others
adapt to seashore conditions, desert heat,
learned that "creamy clusters are followed
by brownish fruits," and "no pittosporum
should be trusted as a foundation plant." Heavier somehow,
these words I hear now from that other life
of marriage, the desolation of your dying.
This morning, walking back across the playground,
walking through white clover and new-cut grass,
my mind crowded as it sometimes is
with excess of memory out of proportion
to time, I ask if these notes could become
a poem, tenuous connections
in convoluted messages
from pittosporum scent in the air, an absurd
scarecrow in a school garden.

Alexandra van de Kamp

JUXTAPOSITIONS

Café Las Tablas, Madrid

Spanish café. Shopping district.
Outside, the buildings blue

in the shade. In here, two waiters
towel-dry cups and saucers

as the TV nature show
zooms in on a Mexican forest.

And this is a poem—
the way we can drink coffee

in clear glasses, its small,
shuffling world in our hands,

while slick orange frogs
unroll their long, spear-like tongues,

or two scorpions, their bodies aglitter,
circle each other,

intent on the kill. How to deal
with the juxtapositions in this world?

That while I'm drinking this coffee,
someone somewhere—

her body still safe in its cave of air—
is walking by the wrong bush

at the wrong time,
or arriving home to find the note

that will change her life?
Newspapers place us

next to what we could be
but are not: the airplane victims

off the Caribbean coast
after the sharks attacked. And here we are

pinned to the chair's floral design,
trying to understand how these truncated

arms and chests could have been,
so briefly before, passengers flying,

cocktails in hand, in the blue solidity
of their cushioned chairs.

Two kinds of chairs:
an ocean of possibilities.

But we put the paper down.
We must accept our lives—

the particular gleam of the floor's
parquet shine, the exact tilt of the sun

as it cuts our bodies into dark and light.
We can't mourn for long

what we are not. But we can pause
beside the television's hurricane coverage,

with houses' roofs tumbling
like flimsy, metallic weeds

across the background's urgent green,
long enough to know that each day

we are next to something
we can't fully love or understand,

like the woman crying to herself
all alone on the bus, or the tree's

dark green tangle of leaves
shimmering above our heads,

as if it could translate for us
one part of the wind. In this life

the body is tucked inside
what is larger than itself:

the doll-blue stare of the omnivorous sky;
beneath our feet, little stars of darkness

weaving themselves through the grass's plot,
while in a movie theater, the reel runs

and all is darkness as our eyes adjust
to what flickers in front of us.

David Baker

Two Poems

HIGH RIDERS

after the suicide of a friend

One is asleep in the saddle and one is half-asleep
or slumping, half-conscious in the miles-high air.
It's so cold a breath is a bite of white water.

One or two have drifted off the path. The rest of you
are trying not to look down, or you look down
into the glacial green bowl, yawning below.

You feel your legs want to float out of the stirrups—
it's easier to look down than look down the side
of the mountain, which is to look over nothing's loss

a mile or more across the ridge cutting away, rising.
One or two are scanning the sky for a high hawk calling.
You pull the horses up to see, and it's a herd

of elk on the ridge, like a brown flock or grove of flowers—
the far seagull cry of the calves—though the herd,
who sensed you all along, rolls away now in waves,

the young hurrying across the stone face as the cows
nuzzle them along, the bulls lagging, looking back.
And are gone. You hear them calling long after

they are gone. The rest of the ride you feel blessed
by the grass, the shivering white-trunked aspens you come
down to, the cold white streams you cross and recross,

letting the horses dip their noses in and drink and huff.
It's late summer, late afternoon. You have come down
from the point where even the water must choose—

west to the ocean or east, so far, so slow, to the sea.

LOW CLOUDS AT DAWN

They are ground cover over the ground cover
of pastures and calving hills, nothing but clouds.
And the clover, timothy, and the long rye-grasses

beneath them, sunk with dew, are nothing but clouds
so low to the ground you see cloud-tops from the road.
At six-thirty you have been driving since two—

no one else on the road, the sage said, going home.
You are two hundred miles and change closer
to the white room and the old man who looks like you,

nothing but clouds for miles, and now a few trees,
and a creek that cuts under the vein of the road,
jimson weed, poor-man's purse, chicory

blue-eyed or wild. There he is in his private room
running with monitors and numbers, by cold degrees.
Or there like a window above the ground cover,

the shining top of a barn's afloat, anesthetic at the tops
of the clouds. Now the face of a stranger leans in
to touch the eyes closed, until you turn away.

Susan Blackwell Ramsey

Two Poems

LETTER TO MATT ON THE OPENING DAY OF DEER SEASON

November fifteenth, but the air's warm as blood.
I wear red, stick to paths through open fields,
imagining you and your brothers in these woods.
A shot reverberates. Silence. Then another,
companionable in this solitary day
as laughter through a neighbor's distant window.

I know the warmth which lures me out to walk
spoils your sport. You're wishing we had snow.
I pictured you tracking pairs of dainty prints,
but no, you said it's easier to see
blood on white, it's easier to follow
and finish the wounded. You hunt by holding still.

Men free of women, women free of men.
Your love's alone this weekend—for a moment
you catch her city-girl scent. She's buying sheets—
three hundred thread count—sitting in coffee shops,
having her nails painted red. Her eyes
brown, luminous, are everywhere. Distraction.

In this late heat success is pressure. Cold,
you could take your time, but by hunter's logic
leisurely processing now risks everything
your patience won, risks having it turn bad.
In weather like this the knives can't hesitate.
In your haste milk washes blood from your hands.

TO A PICKY EATER AT LOVE'S TABLE

This isn't the love you sent back to the kitchen,
the one you now remember as seasoned exactly
to your taste, which you now admit you returned
because you weren't that hungry and because
you thought the kitchen would be open all night.

And now this is set before you. Ominous shapes
in—is it puttanesca? Hunan?—sauce
which stings the tip of your tongue. The smell which rises
repels, attracts—and is this pottery crude
or priceless art you're not qualified to judge?

You miss the pretty plate, that sweet, mild meal
which never burned your lips. I'm not saying make do.
I'm saying it's a long time between meals out here,
and gourmets are pressing their noses to the window
for a whiff of what is cooling on your plate.

Susan Grimm

Three Poems

GREEN WAVE

June 23, 1882. A wave rises out of the smooth, green
pan of Lake Erie—two miles long, eight feet high—
it rushes over Cleveland. No storm, no wind; barges
scrape on the pavement, fish gasp in the streets.
Grandmother, just then being born in Central Europe,

is squeezed out in a gush of fluid and blood.
Now she became we all know—nine months before
pleasure rippled, fastened, and jumped. In the same
country, Grandfather drinks. It's a warm morning,
but the metal cup is still cool in his hands.

In Scotland, Emma's washing her hair. Her mother
holds the lip of the jug to her neck, and the water
fans out over the curling delta. The fourth
lives shielded by the trees, already hidden
in the hills of West Virginia, his voice cut off

by the noises of the river he has yet to cross.
I've seen their pictures. Negatives darken
and curl in the basement. But even as the images
flattened and framed, the living shattered
the glass, swam out of the chemicals, live.

It surprises me to give them sweat and shiver,
silence and scream. They have not visited
me in the night, ghostly hands rising
to beg for the poem of their dog, their house, their
china cup. Disneyesque, their knives and forks

acted out the story of their lives, dancing every day
on the table. They have not asked for that poem.
Like some magic, optical cloak, the past falls
from our shoulders as we labor along. It leaves
a tunnel behind, a canal, a ravine, a maze,

the ball of memory rolling through those years
like an unlit pinball. With Slim it hits a wall—
silence in the roar of the mill. Rags courts
memory, cuts windows, constructs her past
like an approved picture from the Advent calendars

of her youth. Also Mitch Miller's bouncing ball—
coy indicator, chief sunbeam of the silvery moon's
stock schemes and passions—can be blamed for a lot.
Better that dot should be sun on water, sliding
the scallop from crest to trough. Last summer:

I sit on a beach; I wade a lake thinking
my secret dreams, thinking that I'm the point
of the arrow speeding into the future, when
I've already branched, become ridiculous
to the young. Even knowing, I want that steely point

dug in. To this Ohio beach with my secrets,
the waves come—periodic, mutable—each wave so brief,
so chancy in composition—transparent pale green
risen—the wind at its back, the suck beneath.

LAKE ERIE LOVE SONG

From the road, the identical fishing shacks
look so small one mystifies how to fit a bed inside—
pulled down from the wall at night? She sings
with the windows open, a box of fudge on the table,
the sweet grit of it still in her teeth. He hoses
down table and pails, the uncertain skitter of fluids
and scales dribbling away. Together, the highball
glasses clink. She leaves her lipstick mark
while bourbon blows a last gust of the day's heat
down his limbs. Outside, the slap of the waves,
the water's gems and metals snarled with light. Inside,
the rub of the sheets, the body ever willing
to repeat its story. Some peaches and the coffee cups
with a green stripe wait on the sink until morning.

AUNT BELLA

It wasn't me who'd been married before, so I wore
white, scallops that echoed my hair. That's how
it was in the fifties, even though hanging around
the bar Thursdays and Fridays they told me
dirty jokes. I looked like a good-time girl—solid
with curves, a twitchy walk in heels, dyed
hair. What else was there to be, to do? I worked
with alphabetical cards in a box, a phone, dust
and paper in the files. My laugh filled up
the office and lingered in the corridor. I said
yes when he asked me, backhand—a man who felt
the cold, who needed love, who held his breath
against the endless night. I kept my job, but I kept
him, too. Like a short order house, I cooked eggs
over easy, burgers, used plenty of grease. I made
him warm, in bed and out, but it couldn't
last past my death. In the ground I turned over,
shrugged up my shoulder, laid my arm over my head,
pretending not to think about how he could be, less
and less of him until he entered the dark alone.

Philip Memmer

HAUNTED MINI-GOLF

—local Halloween attraction

The Devil's mouth is a tunnel,
cloven in three directions

through the rusting dark of his skull.
His teeth chew a creaking circle.

Even your daughter knows—
if you want a prize from the masked attendant,

you have to ring the bell
hung deep in the loops of this throat.

Finesse beat par in The Graveyard,
but putt too gently here

and your ball spits back down his tongue.
An inch to the right or left

and you drop from a pointed ear.
They eyes are crossed, the laugh is cheerless,

but it's Saturday night in America—
admit you want it, all of it,

the wind cool, the floodlights orange,
the wannabe Succubus selling Cokes—

and yes, that tinny electric ping
for the Ghost who tugs your coat,

the voice you love
turned sweet by greed

as the teenage werewolf looks up from his booth
and the forked tongue starts to sing.

Berwyn Moore

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DECONSTRUCTION OF BLAME

At midnight, carpenters renovate my bedroom,
pounding ten-penny nails with a single stroke

while chanting *Jubilate Deo*. You return
from the party with prostitutes, sequined and oily,

who tuck pornographic word games inside
the pages of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* while my parents

sleep downstairs. You beg me to join your frolicking,
but I flee to my sister's room where I find her sleeping

under umbrella palms and maidenhair ferns, peace
lilies and passion flowers. When I wake her up,

she's not surprised at the jungle sprouting around her.
Back in my room, we try to shoo the prostitutes away

when we hear metal clanking outside. From the window,
we see the carpenters spreading metal remnants

from the basement on the lawn—rusted shears,
a broken shovel, two bicycle rims, and a WWII helmet,

the porch light casting shadows behind them
like gremlins. We rush back to my sister's room,

overtaken with ferns and tangled vines, where you
and the prostitutes, quiet now, sit on the floor watching

a spindly spider battle a fist-sized wasp, its silvery stinger
unrelenting until the spider weakens with a severed leg.

I glare at you, knowing this chaos is *your* doing,
but as I open the door, the shriveled husk of the wasp

swirls away, its broken wings dissipating like dust,
and the spider begins spinning a new web, her abdomen

pulsating with gold light. The weary prostitutes
collect their games and file out of the house, you

and the carpenters trailing pathetically behind them,
your arms weighed down with useless basement booty.

I hear my parents stirring in their room, the morning
light just petting their door, casting away the night

and the noise, invoking the day's unmarked calm.

Laura Bernstein

YOUR LAST NIGHT IN YOUR FIRST HOUSE

The flames begin like a quick breath, one
spontaneous hiss, a shock of light

and it's over. The boys from across the dotted
county line arrive just in time to hose down

the embers of your old life, dab calamine lotion
on your peeling fingers, your arms aching

with the effort of carrying two elderly
neighbor-women to safety.

The press shows up long
past midnight, their cameras reshaping

the landscape into a fiesta;
they call you Hero in static-voices,

snap you soot-darkened in a dozen poses
of startled against the red and blue

revolving sky. You flex for the cameras
surrounded by crumbs of plastic and shadow,

a handful of metal that was
a stove. A single flash and your grandmother's

melted silver, your mother's bloodless white
wedding pose crumple into ash and air.

The scene shifts focus. You are ten or eleven,
languid as a starfish and sleepless in the summer dark,

your favorite sister is hushed
beneath the basement stairs with a nameless boy,

your dead parents, revived and lovely, are entangled
among their own words somewhere above.

The heat of morning is years away.
The streetlight outside your bedroom

wears a dust-halo that imprints across the eye.
A breeze moves through curtains where a window

used to hang against the night, traces cool
lines of fog at the back of your neck.

Your life begins again.

Richard Robbins

HOW TO READ A POEM

Every poem begins just before
9:00 AM and never ends, or the other
way around, reaching toward us
from a place we never knew, stopped
dead at our feet here and now, locked
in the day. The hardest part

is seeing where the dark began
or begins to end. All those men,
long or fetal, dropping from
the sky. All those ashen women
running in the street. Each human
vowel burned, burning, or quiet,

the sun blazing through every line
and tower. No one knows, really,
where light or evil comes from.
The moon knocks at smoke like an eye
behind the door, an eye trying
to get in. All night, tapping

grows weaker in the direction
of caesura, or the soft turn
of the sonnet's ninth line, the
poem that will make us love again.
It's a sound we might have heard once,
less than a heartbeat, a leap
as in the great haiku from hope,
or the end of hope, to knowing.

WAYS IN WHICH YOU ARE A GIANT GOOD KING
HUMBERT BLUE DAHLIA

(Borrowing freely from The Park Seed,
Flower and Vegetable Catalog, 1994)

Midwinter, and I'm browsing through the catalog
you gave me to pick a garden from, and there you are,
sturdy with a somewhat upright habit,
vigorous and bushy to about six feet high.
Always staying neat and restrained,
durable, adaptable, dependable, perennial.
Best for bedding, spectacular spring through fall

(though not bad in the winter, your native weather).
But there's no such thing as a blue dahlia, so
perhaps you're a Picotee Lace Apricot Tuberous Begonia,
a lifetime investment in beauty. Or maybe a Whopper Improved,
or a Big Beef or a Better Boy Tomato, more meaty,
with the same juicy sweetness we've always loved.
Hardy against the wilts, nematodes and tobacco mosaic virus.

Fantastically prolific, though not a burpless hybrid.
Or a rose, the culmination of over 40 years of breeding
by one of England's outstanding rosarians. Named
Novalis. Damask. Snowcloth. Moonwink.
You're luminescent crimson topped with gold,
fresh and elegant, with unmatched brilliance.
Free blooming, long-lived.

Such luscious promises:
cool refreshing color for that shaded bed
is mine with this outstanding variety.
Hardy and cushion forming.

And here I am, with the tentative smile
of the kid in braids from a state without a major city,
winner of the largest sunflower contest,
squinting because the brightness hurts my eyes.

MOST FOOTPRINTS EVER, GO UNSEEN

"The tracks of every mystery you have ever swallowed
move inside your own tracks, shading them slightly or
skewing them with nuances that show how much more
you have become than what you were."

—Tom Brown, Jr., *The Tracker*

Somewhere in my baby-step prints would be the few
remembered strains of my mother's love song to my skeleton
before it was hard, before she was my mother.

Somewhere in my momentum, the splay of toe,
the depth of metatarsal, proves I hate still lives:
plums, linen and crockery.

Trust me, the mud does not ooze up between my toes
in the same way it did when I was a virgin.

Near dusk as I rode on the road through wheat, God winked

with clear clouds and black trees, cupped my center, steadied
the wavering gyroscope, and untied and united the tired tracks
to one steady, headstrong line.

And these have added to the corny lilt in my gait,
as seen by the pressure here under the ball of the foot:
growing a garden into fool bloom, my strongest love

of sleeping bag and tent and late sun emerging under clouds,
the ocean erasing every footprint ever, the wind
in cool dark August tree—a sound heard once, somehow
indelibly—

the need to stomp in joy after Pa's successful surgery,
the quietest engagement in hanging Henry's laundry,
loving someone long and a lot.

Living alone again, afterwards: the determined,
solid, deep
half-moon of high heel. The alchemy of anger, the wisdom
and compassion gained from living in the city, the time

spent praying to telephone and mailbox, the church
music plucking my chords: all this accumulates, grows heavy,
sinks through posture to footprints. My balance. My balance.

Tom Brown, Jr., can read pregnancy, fear, affection
and hunger
in tracks in the duff. I see, on the trail, how Anna is
walking a sob,
returning to her marriage.

By conjuring me up from the ground, could you read
the sign
of my daytime nightmares, my late twin? Translate the
calligraphy
of my skates on black ice dusted with the perfection of half
an inch of snow?

Could you sense the leaping release
of fresh-air elation after weeks inside?
Could you know that I am singing?

GIVEN THE PREMISE THAT I CAN SEND ONE SCENE A WEEK
TO YOUR DREAMING SLEEP

I start with: You're beachcombing on the peninsula.
You are looking for glass floats from Japanese fishing boats
after a storm. After two years in the Pacific, they wash up here.
Instead, on the rocky beach, you find light-bulbs, entire brittle
clear glass light-bulbs flung up from the churning sea.
One of them is me. We speak.

Next, our cribbage game. Building on real life experience,
you never remember the score, we start over, over and over again.
When you are dealt six queens of a possible four, my dream self
grabs you firmly on the left forearm. You lunge, the table
collapses,
the cards fly off, spades turn to arrows, pierce the curtains.
You wake in a cold sweat.

I send you a recording of R. Vaughn Williams' first composition,
age five, "the galoshes of Happiness."
It sticks in your brain for seven weeks
till you shake your head as if you have fleas.
You wake in a hot sweat.

A letter arrives from me addressed "Dear Gift and Privilege."
Written in a language only you can understand, it tells you
of my amazement that
everyone I look at isn't you.

A hummingbird flits around the fluorescent lights
of the elevator you ride each morning to work. It is me,
it can not find any red sweetness to drink.
You wake, sweating.

You are a car in the fast lane, with its left-turn signal on,
threatening
to change. I am asleep in the back seat.

I am a cat crossing the street at night,
and you must write a prayer for me.

A white-tailed deer grazes ten yards from me,
telling me I am gentle enough. You are grass.

In your dreams, you desperately want to sleep.

THE CURRENT STATUS OF OUR REGION'S ARTESIAN WELLS

It's Wednesday afternoon and the aquifers under us
go about their daily business, collecting, filtering,
offering their water. Their names are mysterious,
based on tribes, on rivers, men, pure ones,
Kirkland-Cohansey, Passaic-Raritan-Magothy,
gravel-filled lakes big as seas. Light
is not spoken here, no such thing as color
near the great heart splashing. If sight were possible
through sand we'd see something resembling
skeletons of fireworks, jellyfish tentacles in smoke.
Heavy metals gather in storm clouds. But for now,
the water tastes like beginnings, like human roe,
like the innate happiness that can nearly
explain how blind infants know how to smile.

PROPHECIES FOR THE PRESENT

The thickness of onion skins, the toughness of apple peel,
the height of the honeycombs, the lushness of squirreltail,
the bands on caterpillars, red of goose breastbone,
the tightness of cornhusks, extent of the feathers
down the leg of the partridge:
cold winter is coming.

Cold winter is coming:
carrots grow deep, crows gather closely, sheep huddle, and
the oxen,
whatever they are, the oxen lick themselves against the grain.

The future like a chrysalis, with gold flakes, clarity,
translucence
and moisture, is attached tenuously to the certain wood of
the present,
attached by threads, sturdy threads, of causation.

The molecules of weather and those of gentle beasts pulse
together.

All is well.

Then again, "A cow with its tail to the West makes the
weather best,
a cow with its tail to the East makes the weather least."
And I say to you, a cow that swooshes its tail back and forth
will make
some good weather, some bad, just like life.

I propose more modern auguries:

If a moth is seen flying up into a streetlight,
a deer will be unable to move in the headlights.

If the scribbles you draw to get your pen started go
counterclockwise,
the next check you write will bounce.

When the word *emotion* appears in a poem,
that poem will be bad.

The arrival in an orchard of a woman who smells like a fashion
magazine
foretells a false spring, when 30 percent of the peach blossoms
will be lost to Arctic winds.

A falling star falling upwards foretells
a Big Bang bigger than the one we understand.

If you meet a man so color blind he can never see the beauty
of his green eyes,
the next mountain you visit will be covered with
impenetrable clouds.

Above all, remember, as we know from the almanacs,
a change in the weather is indicated if a rooster crows

before twelve o'clock noon,
as roosters inevitably do.

About Our Contributors

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RICHARD ROBBINS lives in Mankato, Minnesota. Eastern Washington University Press recently published his *Famous Persons We Have Known*, and a new book, *The Untested Hand*, will soon be published by Sandhills Press.

TINA KELLEY is a reporter for the Metro section of *The New York Times*. Word Press will publish her first book, *The Gospel of Galore*, this year. She lives in Brooklyn.

POETRY NORTHWEST PRIZE AWARDS

Macleod-Grobe Prize: \$500

Steven Reese for Four Poems (Summer 2001)

Bullis-Kizer Prize: \$200

Donald Platt for Three Poems (Autumn 2001)

Theodore Roethke Prize: \$200

Lynne Knight for "Deep Quake" (Autumn 2001)

Richard Hugo Prize: \$200

Aimee Nezhukamatathil for Three Poems (Winter 2001-02)

NOTICE

This Spring Issue 2002 will be the last for *Poetry Northwest*. Two years ago, the University of Washington told us it could no longer support us financially and that we would have to become self-sustaining by July 1, 2002. *Poetry Northwest* and its Board of Advisers have been unable to meet that deadline. I'd like to thank that Board personally now for its efforts—Ross Whitney (chair), John Glowney, Peter Sears, Anita Helle, and Carolyn Reynolds Miller—and for selecting our yearly prize-winners listed above. I'd also like to thank our contributors, readers, and numerous well-wishers, our editorial assistants Gordon Grant, Julie Larios, and Joan Manzer, Donald Summers of the UW Development Office, and especially Robin Seyfried, the former managing editor, without whose good taste and photography and editorial judgments during the past 24 years, the magazine would have done and been far less. In our 43rd and final year, we are the oldest magazine in the country that publishes nothing but poetry. We can only hope someone else will manage to do better. We will be publishing an anthology of the best work from these pages under the editorship of Robin Seyfried and with my assistance. Until then, goodbye and good luck.

David Wagoner

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