

FIREWEED

POETRY OF WESTERN OREGON



Volume One

Number One

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Editors: Erik Muller, Ann Staley, David Laing

Lawson Fusao Inada

from A NIGHT IN THE VALLEY

I always like to keep
some sesame seeds
in my pocket.

They stay there
with coins, keys, sand,
whatever gathers,
whatever comes my way.
You'd be surprised
how long they keep.

On nights like these,
I reach in
and pull out
a fingerful.

I like the grit
of things.
I like the spark
of flavor.
I like the taste
of memory --
the close, the far.

I like to remember
who we are.

I eat the stars.

Gary L. Lark

THANKSGIVING SNOW

I woke to frost November, 1953,
and the fear in mama's eyes,
smothering flames and smoke
still lingering from her dream.

Hunched near the fireplace
she told of a fierce devil
throwing hot coals on her.
She tried to escape, but couldn't.

A phone call brought the meaning,
her mother was dead.
Thanksgiving week we packed the Buick
and headed for Idaho.

In the long sage miles
past Horse Heaven hills mama grew younger;
by Vale she was in high school,
at Weiser we stopped for gum.

When she held my hand into the church
in Cambridge we were the same age.
Papa rocked her in his arms
and quietly sang the "Coupon song."

I watched for movement in the badger holes
that tunneled among the graves.
They lowered the casket.
The badgers never appeared.

At the ranch after the funeral
we ate roast beef and gooseberry pie
as the first snow covered our tracks
sealing us in a family picture.

Feeding cattle gave us reason to leave
the shadow of the house.
A black and a dappled-gray were teamed
for pulling the wagon to the pasture.

Cousins forked alfalfa from a mound of snow
steaming its scent around our wool-cradled heads.
Our bodies glad to be used;
in work we dared laugh again.

Piles of hay were strung between snowball fights
across the slope that became sky.
In clouds of horse breath and hay dust
we began to know each other.

In the house mama started growing older.
Stories bringing her back through her living.
Moments spiraling together, past and present
waltzing agelessly around the room.

The Buick pulled us through the slurry
past the grandmother I didn't know
where she lay among the badger holes,
mama relearning to drive.

I watched the road snake among the hills
rounded like mama's shoulders,
snow covering all but a scapula of stone
protruding cold in the morning air.

Alice Ann Bagley

MILEAGE

Stuck at the filling station
on the way out of town,
he leans heavily on the pump,
waiting for the next "fill'er up."
He calls himself Mileage,
and he loves the smell of gas.
He always keeps the out-of-state plates
talking at the pump as long as he can,
figuring the more he knows
the farther he can go.
And he's thinking,
"Someday ..."
knowing, for now,
he's traveling on fumes.

Fran Salkin

STRAJAFSKY, ONCE

My grandfather began as someone else
somewhere far from here.
He fled his country crossing a continent, an
ocean,
seeking a new home.
He was taciturn and never spoke
of who and what he'd left behind
or lost along the way.

My grandfather sat in a bank in Canada.
Just another Russian immigrant with a
tongue twisting name.
"It's too long and difficult to pronounce,"
said the tight-faced banker.
"You need a Western name now."

My grandfather looked out the bank window,
he wouldn't have shown what he felt.
He was proud and hard.
He was going to fit.

A horse-drawn cart with brightly painted
lettering went by
Rouman's Milk and Eggs.
My grandfather pointed nonchalantly
at the cart.
"I'll take that one."

Abraham Abraham Rouman
It was only a name.
It meant nothing to him.
He had lost much more.

FOR S. T. OCTOBER 29, 1957 TO MARCH 25, 1989

Sage, I was thinking about your name,
I never asked where it came from,
what your parents meant by it,
though I've known you since you were about three
and no higher than your German shepherd's shoulder.
What does it mean, to be Sage?

I imagine the desert plant,
the delicate branches, the pungent cleanness of it,
in the bright air.
That's Sage.

I imagine holiday cooking,
and the warm aromas of families,
an herb with a crinkled leaf
and many varieties.
That, too, is Sage.

And I think of Sage, the Sage
as "a wise person,"
someone you'd find on a mountain
when you needed to ask a question.
You are the only Sage I know
so you must be the Sage.

Well, here we are on the mountain.
Sage, I've got some questions.
Whoever invented this way of doing things?
Is all this beauty worth it?
Does it compensate,
the way the red tails sounded this morning
mating in the oaks above the pasture
or the narrow intensity of sunrise
squeezed between the mountain
and the rainclouds?
All this hurt--all this beauty,
does it just go on like this
or is it different after?
Is it all right to be sad?

There you go, Sage, putting on the universe
like a cape made of wild bird feathers,
leaving us to figure things out for ourselves,
now that you have all the answers

Richard Dankleff

FOR SCHMIDT, 2ND MATE

We knew Schmidt had something in his head
we hadn't. But sailors trying to talk God
or life with our ex-preacher who could navigate
through ancient Greek, got nothing. He was blank,
off somewhere, noncommittal as the stars.
He was our wise man, but he read alone,
shut in his cabin behind steel bulkheads.
The death he met tightlipped was all his own;
then a pilot boat with doctor came, too late;
the doctor filled out forms. The steward packed
a trunk--work gear, shore clothes, books. Schmidt
was shelved in our cold storage. That was that.
We talked on in the usual dreary bars,
we argued what a wise man could have said.

Alice Marie Evans

GRANDFATHER

In your garden
You pulled scallions
From raw earth
Deftly trimming them and
Clean, you handed them to me,
Your last gift.

Later, in your clean
Hospital bed you lay curled,
The raw earth waiting,
My kiss lay unreceived
On your blind cheek.

Grandfather,
Hailstones big as onions
Pounded my windshield
On the way to your burial.

Ingrid Wendt

OFFERINGS

For B. & D.

When they passed the collection plate and I asked
Where does the money go? my mother, ever
certain, whispered, *To God, for His work.*
Those words were enough

though for years
what use God had of money, I couldn't guess.
And when a young friend died?
God wanted her, too.

Those days, all of us knew there was no
question too great, nothing the right word
couldn't stop. *Why?* led straight
where we wanted to go. *If only*, never

kept going in
circles; and *courage*
was always a day we could step into
from the right side of the bed.

Now, when I learn of your grief
I look for those words that make everything right.
These words, my whole heart is in them.
This whisper, I pass it to you.

Harriet Wilson

RIGHT IN YOUR OWN BACKYARD
for Dorothy, 1894-1978

"Right in your own backyard," my mother told me,
"you'll find what you're looking for." No matter
that we had no yard, I knew what she meant,
though I rejected her homilies, traveled
out-of-faith and out-of-state
to another ocean's edge to start my search.

In clay a sculptor's hands could mold
I planted seeds that failed to flourish,
forgot to water those that did,
dug up weeds, a turtle
six months in hibernation, some bones
long buried by a dog long dead.

They say that archeologists unearthed five Troys
before they reached the epic one. Turkish farmers
on those plains use the rubble
to build small defenses to keep
their animals in. Stone on stone
we shape our findings to our lives.

So history reports that in his own backyard
Sixtus the Fifth found an obelisk
carved thirty centuries before
to mark another ruler's day
and set it upright in the north portal
where it still punctuates an entry to his Rome.

So I warmed the turtle back to life,
let weeds flower corners impossible to cultivate,
did work ready to my hand, and matched
love that came to me. But ores that lie unearthed
in my circus maximus, I have yet to gather
strength to mine. Maybe Momma was right:

The heart can lie in or out the home
you thought you had to leave; or maybe
burrow cities deep wherever
you light. Did she know how long
I would have to dig--through centuries?-- before
I could find this portal to my own backyard?

Chip Goodrich

I CUT YOUR HAIR

Yesterday, the Exxon Valdez
struck Bligh Reef and ruptured
crude oil into Prince William Sound,
and you started your period.
Cramps are worst on your first day,
it's a major spawning-ground for herring,
I was in a bad mood already,
leave me alone.

The Easter newspaper ink
smothers the feathers of balck-legged kittiwakes.
The sea otter surfaces for air
and breathes oil. From the sofa,
inspecting your split ends, "Will you
trim my hair?" My love

for smoldering rage rustles the paper.
My hands shake. The print blurs.
Now you sit so quietly under the scissors
you might be a seabird, in shock,
covered with oil, suffering my attentions.

Joan Dobbie

A BREED OF FISH

I know
there's a certain

breed of fish
that is female

for the first half of its life
& male for the second.

This fish then
when she loses her power

to bear
gains something also

desirable- -
a new kind of power

& it's nice to imagine
all those sweet little

females
flicking their tails

& the mothers,
those young mothers,

might not mind their men's
tyrannies so much

knowing that their turn would come
while the men,

those old men,
would look back with such longing

to the babies they'd carried
- - warm fish in the womb - -

& they would remember
tenderness.

Anita T. Sullivan

PASSIVE RESISTANCE

It is the horses, standing in the field
Who turn the sun aside each day for me
And show how light can slide more easily
Off horses' backs than soldiers, who when they yield
To sword thrust, fall to earth and glide
Beneath a shadow barely wide enough
To make them silhouettes. At six o'clock
The horses are standing still, their lifted heads
Drawing the dark like Ariadne's thread.
The sun swings around the world in one full spin
To make a final rush of beams against the lock.
Amid the turmoil of the flaming spears,
By merely standing still, the horses win;
They lean against the light, and disappear.

Vincent Wixon

ON THE ISLAND

The sheep have gone wild
after so many years.
You can find bits of wool
wound in the wild rose
on the bluffs above the cove.
The homesteaders are long gone;
weekenders' homes hug the beach
facing the way home.

This time of year the sheep graze
on the west side of the island
over the hill near permanent water.
You see them here in winter,
smaller than domestic sheep,
grazing in the mild rain.

Over the years, on the island,
things seem to shrink.
Inbreeding diminishes them.
In another hundred years
they will forage in the palms
of your hands.

Tom Crawford

WATER OUZEL

Maybe it's from moss he gets the green light to walk
under water. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians he's
almost mentioned, but who would believe in the miracle
of a little bird especially standing in white water peering
down around his own feet for food while the creek flows
over. Down there is always subjective, but you can
watch him descend in a zig zag walk down to where light
sets the table. Small himself, it's the spineless he's
after. What we want to figure out, he eats. How many
feet of creek does it take, for example, to make one
Ouzel? What feeling is to poetry, larvae to caddis- -a
sudden hatch- -the porch light by the screen door
where hundreds hang on. We have to be content to
name what he brings up: hellgrammite, nymph, stonefly.

Clem Starck

REMODELING THE HOUSE

The next step was
to tear out the dormer
some half-assed handyman cobbled together,
ruining the lines of this old house,
and build it back again
proper.

Now every true apprentice knows
there are principles to reckon with, spirit
level and plumb bob; so,
I honor the man who taught me
the soul is a house
and you build it, joining the wood,
driving the nails home.

Peter Jensen

NORTHERN SPOTTED OWL

Moonlight feels filters of fir
needles and leaves blue light
behind its fall to earth between
eight hundred-year-old columns, some
more than ten feet thick, dark
inside bounced sunlight, pale
remainder of the day.

Nocturnal cavity nesters see
this light among trees like noon.
Flying squirrels come out to feed
on fruiting fungus bodies underground.
These phoney bats spread their legs
to stretch webbed side skins tight
across the air and glide down,
scamper up, glide down and across
moonlit openings of summer breeze.

These gliders catch wide eyes
that love dim light and turn it
into bright, brain images.
A northern spotted owl pokes
its round, crossed face
from totem hole high in fir snag
and believes its eyes.

One quick jump spreads owl
on soft, quiet wings that loft
against air, and one quick kick
of turned tail guides brown owl:
beak, eyes, body, and talons that trail
right at rodent as it glides
into strike zone crash
with owl's open hooks
that lock in squirrel's flesh.

Only then, owl flaps to rise
and cries three barks--thanks for food!
to ancient trees and moon.

Roger Weaver

FOR MY WIFE

Towards evening shadows slant
and tall firs point where sun rises.
Memory becomes a highway unwinding
from my wheels, stretches farther
than I can see. Driving away from
the valley's hazy sadness towards
you, I press the pedal harder
to catch patches of sunlight
all down the coastline, water
breaking up on the rocks below.
I move from shadow to light,
am so much speeding color
under fabric skies.

Brenda Shaw

VINHO BLANCO SÊCO

The young Madeiran waiter
was new at his job -
hardly more than a child -
masses of umber hair
and eyes to match.

He went through a complex routine
with the wine bottle:
removed it from the ice,
showed me the label,
slowly enunciated its name
to be sure it was what I wanted.
Then he draped the bottle carefully
with a green napkin,
made several flourishes, and poured.

I thought he'd stop
for the approving sip,
but he filled it to the brim -
then realized his mistake,
went into a confusion of apologies,
stammering out his learned English.
The stammer was for real,
connected with neither learned language
nor embarrassment.

I smiled, said not to worry,
tasted and pronounced it fine.
But in his embarrassment
he lifted up his chin.
I realized someone, sometime,
had cut this child's throat.
The scar ran ear to ear.

DECISIONS

The old man's first decision of the day:
to make, or not to make, the bed.
His wife, God rest her soul,
would insist make the bed!
But then, what does she know
of his present rumpled days?
So what's a rumpled bed?
He leaves the room.

Second decision - and for him
much more important -
what to do about the stubble on his chin?
Facing the mirror in the bath,
he sighs, reluctantly pulls out
the razor from the drawer,
foams up his face
and starts to shave.

Breakfast requires no heavy thought,
it's routine: bran flakes and coffee
carefully sandwiched in between
Good Morning America and The Price is Right
to make it last an hour or two.
Some days he treats himself
to ham-and-eggs and Danish
at a small cafe on Main.

Lunch? Today he has a buddy
who will meet him there.
They'll sit and reminisce
about their sporting days,
the wives they used to have,
and each will brag about his kids
that the other will never
have the chance to meet.

The children never visit,
seldom write,
and hardly ever call
except sometimes on holidays,
but neither will acknowledge this.
And so the afternoon will pass
in idle talk or beach-side walk,
weather permitting, of course.

The last decision of the day:
supper - what to fix?
Even could he fund the eating out,
loneliness at dinner time
is more than he can bear,
He wonders if the solitary gull
he saw this afternoon
minds eating fish alone?

Decisions never were his strongest point.
At least his wife had always said
that he sure had the perfect knack
for never knowing right from wrong.
When the last TV show ends,
he faces once again the unmade bed
and asks himself what he would do
about tomorrow - if the choice were his.

Rodger Moody

TRIPTYCH

1

I remember the windless six story building,
its flagpole stuck dead center
on the front lawn, jets
landing and taking off, how the Pacific
pounded against the sea wall.

I walked the two mile stretch of reef,
alone, trying to discover which parts of myself
spark when they rub, the past
the only road that could help me.

2

Once I stood in a plowed field
asking only for a taste of olive in my mouth,
but no answer appeared on my tongue.
Then I remembered the summer when I was twelve,
how at the Vacation Bible School picnic
the preacher's boy pretended to press a stick
into the flower outlined by a blond girl's
cotton slacks, how I just stood there,
looking up at the sky.

3

Time's running out,
unraveling like a ball of loose string whacked
with a fungo bat.

A row of sycamores brush the sky,
each leaf quivering brilliantly
in the morning wind.

My boy stands up in bed,
tottering between his mother and me,
making that noise in the back
of his throat. It's 6:00 a.m.,
and he's ready.

Helen Ronan

TYRANNOSAURUS HEX

Golly, Mom, gee
whiz, I only
asked,

What dinosaurs
lived here
when you were
a little girl!

You said there
used to be
a swamp
where the
shopping center's
now,

And lima bean fields
with a great big tree
where the airport is,

How come you can't
just answer
me?

Kay Johnson

FIRST FIRE

A sudden chill in August briefly warns,
the sweetest season dwindles into dark.

Silence creeps in stealthily encasing
cricketsong and wind-stirred leaves, until
all that remains is the rattling of seed pods,
the hinged sound of geese passing over.

The patterns they form,
their calls to one another,
the wind their wings move,
lend a sense of watchfulness
to a place, that
without them,
would collapse upon its sadness.

Lucky for this neighborhood, hardly more
than mill shacks,
rusted cars
lying below their flight path.

A woman listens to the geese,
kneels by the stove,
strikes a match from a book
on which "Thank You" has
been printed,
lights a fire to answer
the first cry of this new cold.

She reminds herself "phone for firewood,"
wonders if this summer cache of paper
egg cartons, pizza boxes, junk mail
will crush the tiny flame.

Still kneeling,
gazing at the vast grey sky,
a sky that promises
yet does not yield rain,
but chills,
she reads aloud
the scrolled "Thank You,"
happy for one more summer of grass
still full of green.

POETRY REVIEW: LISA MALINOWSKI STEINMAN ALL THAT COMES TO LIGHT

Periodically our media fret about literacy: our being able to read and write, our being educated and informed. It's no surprise that Lisa Malinowski Steinman is literate in the poems of All That Comes To Light (Arrowood Books, Corvallis); after all, she is a scholar-teacher at Reed and edits Hubbub. More to the point, Ms. Steinman writes in the radically literate vein of some great American moderns: Moore, Stevens, Williams.

Like them, she explores making meaning, writing poems to find and express experience. Her poems demonstrate and dramatize how a representative person achieves meaning. This literacy examines with suspicion its own skills and traditions. "Obviously," she asserts, "we . . . have our work cut out for us." What sort of work that is some title words reveal: meditation, rumination, translation, drafting and tallying. She poses many themes as questions and shifts her viewpoint as she rides planes, boats, and cars. Here is a resultant stanza:

Living as we do, we dream of birds and bridges.
I can't help thinking what they figure we will one day
have;
they are anchored on the earth.
And I remember my father, who loved opera, singing
me to sleep on trips.
I know the music hidden in all the highway signs from
Ann Arbor to Boston.
For me, the highest moments still come in the most
mundane language:
Exit. Emergency Parking. Food. Gas. Lodging.

Long lines, leaps of association, specifics contemplated, puns, the highest and most mundane- - we find this range throughout. Everything, as Williams said, is material for poetry. Steinman's authority holds these fragments, makes these collections sparkle and seethe. She is forceful and clear even when she cannot bring experience to light. She is absorbed in her projects, yet wide awake, capable of rebounding off her own statements in understated humor or triumph. Close to her materials, her persona keeps apart from us, as in these lines from "Saying Good-By to Cary Grant":

I seem to have established a certain distance between us.

That's fine.
It's you and I and all this empty space.
The script writers have gone home.

This promotes genuine performance. Poems are her filibusters, her woolgathering, "catching things on the wing." Balancing this indulgence, the poet monitors civic life: "It's a free country- -inexact, not fastened," yet it's a sad country, too. "We are not home here and, more, do not know what we lack," "We all feel slightly out of place," "Who will show us how to live?"

"We are inspired, betrayed, traduced"- -the poet's calling requires effort and failure, yet promises "small translations" and "bouquets on the table at all times." Ms. Steinman qualifies the proverb "the words will come one day" by adding slyly "or later." Many of her poems close on this tension, this hard summation, which suggests the synthesizing power of Stevens in the coda of "Sunday Morning." As in such a close:

You are not to be impressed by this.
The things of this world will always complain;
there's no pleasing the things of the world.
The Port Orford cedar from which we build our ships,
the scrub jay that plants sunflower seeds so they'll
 sprout and be open
when the jay returns to eat them,
the wind that steals our warmth,
come between us and whatever we want to see
 through or within them.
And across such gulfs, we talk on rainy days with our
 friends,
cold-riden, aware of the difficulties of translation,
especially when moving.

E.M.

Note: Ms. Steinman's volume was a finalist in the Oregon Book Awards.

NOTES FROM THE EDITORS

This first issue says what Fireweed is: a gathering of poems from Western Oregon. We wish to record and reflect our literary circumstance, to preserve and foster it., We believe there are more worthy poems than places for them and many readers who enjoy their neighbor poets.

**

Dave said the name as we brainstormed. It stuck. Many people like the name because they know the plant: abundant, early to cover disturbed land, including clear- cuts, its lowest flowers blooming first. Yet sifting in with the enthusiasm came news of other Fireweed ventures: a feminist magazine, a press in Alaska and one in the Mid-West, a poetry magazine, defunct, edited in Creswell! We shuddered a bit. Should we reel in and cast again? Less fresh, less bright than we had felt, we determined to remain Fireweed.

**

It's our habit to mythologize journeys west, to Oregon. We three Easterners moved to Oregon, in part because we read Traveling Through The Dark and West of Your City (one of us typed a copy of this). Stafford, we thought, invited us to "a state," part land, part language. "Stafford country" is one name for what we inhabit, our place unnamed yet in its variety.

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

ALICE ANN BAGLEY teaches high school literature and creative writing in Corvallis and was the 1987 winner and 1988 runner-up in the OCTE writers competition; her poems have been published in CALYX and other journals.

TOM CRAWFORD lives near Hebo at the Oregon coast. He is the author of I WANT TO SAY LISTEN, published by the Ironwood Press, and IF IT WEREN'T FOR THE TREES, by the Lynx House Press. He has received a fellowship from the NEA.

RICHARD DANKLEFF, retired professor of English at OSU, lives in Corvallis. OSU has published two books of poems, POPCORN GIRL and WESTERNS. He is working on a third collection, which focuses on his Merchant Marine experiences.

JOAN DOBBIE recently returned to New York, her home state, after spending several years writing and teaching poetry and yoga in Eugene; she has completed a manuscript of poems about her life in Boston in the '60's.

BARBARA DRAKE, well-known for her poetry, teaches at Linfield College and lives on acreage in Yamhill County. Her third collection of poems, WHAT WE SAY TO STRANGERS, is published by Breitenbrush.

ALICE MARIE EVANS has lived in Eugene since 1981. A former newspaper reporter, she now toils for the Lane Literary Guild and teaches poetry classes.

CHIP GOODRICH, a self-proclaimed "foul weather poet," works as a gardener for Benton County Parks, and homesteads on the edge of Corvallis.

ELEANOR GRIFFITTS retired from earlier careers in social work and journalism, and now writes and lives in Waldport.

LAWSON FUSAO INADA is a widely published poet and well-known teacher. A professor at SOSC, Lawson is the author of BEFORE THE WAR, Morrow, 1971, the first volume of poetry by an Asian-American to be published by a major firm. He is an editor of the Asian-American anthology, THE BIG AIIIEEEEE ! Howard University Press, forthcoming.

PETER JENSEN teaches English at Lane Community College and works for Oregon Natural Resources Council. He has authored two books of poetry, the new one WHEN WAVES SPROUT BIRDS.

KAY JOHNSON is a piano teacher who lives in Bend.

GARY LARK of Corvallis has recently published in BLUE UNICORN, MAGICAL BLEND, AND IMPETUS; a book, VARIATIONS ON A DREAM, will be out this fall from Foothills Publishing.

RODGER MOODY edits SILVERFISH REVIEW and is winner in poetry of the 1989 Lane Literary Guild contest; forthcoming poems will appear in THE SOUTHERN POETRY REVIEW.

HELEN RONAN lives in Eugene and has been, variously, a librarian, musician, Marine, teacher, waitress, and editor.

FRAN SALKIN directs Gately Adolescent Day Treatment in Portland; she skis, travels, and is interested in exploring her Russian roots.

BRENDA SHAW is a New Englander who now lives in Eugene. She spent many years working as scientist in Scotland, and has published on both sides of the Atlantic. A book of poems, THE COLD WINDS OF SUMMER, 1987, is from Blind Serpent, Dundee, Scotland.

CLEMENS STARCK is a journeyman carpenter who lives on a forty-acre farm south of Dallas. His recent poems have appeared in HUBBUB, MR. COGITO, KAYAK and other magazines.

ANITA T. SULLIVAN writes and tunes pianos in Corvallis. Her book on the philosophy of piano tuning won the 1986 Western States Book Award for creative non-fiction.

ROGER WEAVER teaches the poetry workshop at OSU. The Trout Creek Press has published collections of his work.

INGRID WENDT'S second volume of poems, SINGING THE MOZART REQUIEM, was published in 1987 by Breitenbush Press and received the 1988 Oregon Book Award for poetry. Associate editor of CALYX, she is also active in the artist-in-the-schools program.

HARRIET WILSON retired from twenty-two years of high school English teaching in Istanbul, Ibadan, and Eugene, where she currently writes and runs and reads.

VINCE WIXON teaches English at Crater High School in Central Point and was the 1988 Oregon Teacher of the Year. Co-producer of a video portrait of William Stafford, Vince has published his own poems as well.