FIREWEED

POETRY OF WESTERN OREGON

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Beverly Partridge

PRUNING

Each branch winds its way
toward a purpose. I cannot
say it's not part of the
balance. So I prune by a
rule. Cut all the inside
branches, close to the trunk.

Which continue upward?
Which stretch out?

I always leave more branches
than I should. Never quite
cut it to shape. Why can't
I see the main form? The little
branches look important too.

I leave it contorted -
half itself and half my choice.
Never quite want to go all
the way in my training. Hope
the living thing can figure
out what's best for itself.

It will somehow straighten
out, balance itself, become
a beautiful dancer on point.

Cut the branches which cross
each other. But which branch
do I cut out?
Cut off the tips that are
reaching too far. Then the
buds will branch, going in
both directions.

My eyes follow their move-
ment, identify and recognize
each one.

Ingrid Wendt

IOWA. MIDNIGHT.

This lawn between rains a new presence: heat
climbing out of the grass with fragrance,
drawing a quilt of clouds
close as memory we almost can touch

like children again the last ones up
for blocks, whispering.

Under the corner streetlamp circles of rain
on the sidewalk, sprouting like dimes.

Long white shawl of the porch we sit on.
This house, without her, where still
we are her guests.

*

Where we have chosen to live, the land
never lets us forget our size.

Small as streetlamps in sunlight, we
couldn't change it ourselves if we wanted to:

Midwesterners both out of touch with our own
native arrogance. I think of this land

you tilled as a boy. Thousands of rows of
corn fields bounding you the way they bounded

the Illinois town I couldn't wait to leave.
Coming back

no longer part of fighting
the land for a living,

having forgotten how much of our lives
we owe it.

*

Inside, what she meant to come back to:

Mother's Day, 80th birthday cards neatly
back in their envelopes, ready for reading again,

special glasses for reading, for threading
needles propped for safekeeping in spools of thread.

Crochet hooks tight in balls of yarn.
Afghan she'd only one square to go.

This naming we know could go on forever.

Missouri granddaughter's wedding she'd gone for
only a weekend away.

*

Maple next to the streetlamp
unnatural green. Streetlamp

that confident flashlight
children still shine on the stars.

Ingrid Wendt

ON THE NATURE OF FAMILY TRAVEL

Three months of more togetherness
Than we had bargained for: often
The same hotel room, all three of us
Each night trying to find the right
Cheap restaurant, ways
To pass time, writing home: some people
Sink or swim; we dog-paddle.

Not that it wasn't good.
Landlocked as Russians in our awareness of place, each
Museum opened us up, each castle truly fulfilled
The promise of guidebooks. Who could
Not enjoy walking each day to market instead of
Taking the car, even in rain? Where we were
Privilege rang, and every morning we answered,

Never knowing just what we'd hear.
One day we drove to the moors. They were near
And said to be where you could get lost.
We parked at the first steep rise, climbed
Stile and floundering hill (wave
Or dune, who could tell which?), waded
Heather that really was purple, stone walls

Below us ringing back clouds, thinking
Soon we'd get to one of the ridges all
Around us everywhere singed with sky,
Startled with sheep; together
All the time dipping down, climbing,
Against the limitless wind, exclaiming Look!
Come farther!
Come here!

Elaine Case

EASTER MORNING

At three the dark blue sky hangs
like a curtain from the Pacific
behind the darker frame of trees.
I have seen it before like this.

Spirea moves white branches.
The porch swing boards
touch bones in my back.

That dark line of trees
is an ending and a beginning.
I have colored eggs in the house
and wait for dawn.
Daylight will bring coffee
comforting the span of one day.

REGIONAL POEMS

I. The Courier of News

Whenever I drive past Jacksonville
and on through Ruch,
I immediately begin to notice
those bright orange
Grants Pass Courier tubes
blooming by the roadside.

I realize, then, that I am entering
different territory,
and become aware
of shadows, trees, pastures, breeze,
the entire aspects
of the Applegate Valley

as if I had never been there before.

II. This Modern Life

This modern life
doesn't always
make
much sense:

on the way
to a major
Northwest nature
conference,

I rush up
the Rogue River
and dash past
Crater Lake.

III. Asphalt

A guy came by just now,
announcing that he had a
"full truckload of fresh asphalt"
and that his boss told him to
"get rid of it at the right price."

So how about my dirt driveways,
he asked. Well, no, said I,
but you might try that guy
over there, or over there,
and if they don't want it,
I know someone in Utah who might.

The last I saw of him,
he took off rumbling in precisely
the right direction of your home.

THE THINGS WE KEEP FOR OTHERS

U.P.S. packages for neighbors, tempting
in their anonymous brown wrap.
Lost dogs. Private treasures
a friend entrusts to me.
Home from the Peace Corps, she comes
to collect the painting
that left its square on my wall,
the urn, like something from a Mayan dig,
stroked it each morning
as I bent to light the fire. Each check
on her inventory, each gathering home
of hers, a rent in mine.

Yet another winter, another friend
lay his carpet on the bare wood
floor of my den. Morning sun
lit its Turkey reds,
juicy as plums from Black Sea trees,
carried me deep inside Istanbul's bazaar,
beyond streets of copper merchants,
alabaster and gold.
When he shouldered it away
I wished I had rolled it,
wrapped in brown paper,

to lie in the attic next to boxes
of books my children underlined
then set aside, of their clothes
too good for Goodwill.
Is there room, they ask? Do you mind?
And I want to tell them,
attics expand and contract with more ease
than the heart. What I keep for you
is you, unwrapped. Each time you've come
to collect I have always known
the genie's gifts are yours,
the carpet has but room for one.

CHILDREN LIE ON THE FISSURES OF THIS EARTH

Made with a king-sized sheet, twin beds become
one continent of play where our grandson lies
midway, naked and kicking. We change
his diaper, bounce and tickle him. No prince,
he twists from side to side over the seam
of the joined beds unaware of split. We
whose spines are stiffer must choose a side
for love, yours or mine. But our uniting
years ago, incarnate here again, straddles
any rift. His fingers reach out to me,
to you, trusting us to care for him.

Rodger Moody

SLEEPING WITH FIRE

There were rockets on the island,
their nose cones pointed toward Russia,
millions apiece for ninety seconds
of photos. I slept with a pulse building
behind my eyes.

At one launch
a man closer to the blast than me
stood frozen while the rocket
hovered above the ground,
as it lifted off
its long body tilting
he turned then ran, hard,
his bones aching
for distance.

One morning
as I walked to the pier
the world hit me all at once,
and I lost my bowels in a flash
of light, which explained everything.
Nothing has added up since.

Johnston Atoll, 1971

LAMENT

I want to tell you
about the island

it wasn't a vacation
or a pretty girl

the pier is still rotten
with the odor of shoes
made for going to sea

and narrow tracks stem
out of bunkers
on the island's west face

it wasn't a boyhood hill
or a sports car

here a careful heart
draws nearer to its breath
radar beams watch the sky

Johnston Atoll, 1970

Rodger Moody

THE WALL

A man walked into a wall
he did it for fun
he did it
because he never had any
because fun was hard to find
and though any man
could walk into a wall
he thought this would make him special
even change his life

he was always careful of his nose
he turned his face to one side

Michael Feld Simon

WHILE SETTING OUT SUET FOR THE BIRDS

Wednesday snow dusted us like sugar donuts
Now Friday, it's 4 to 6 inches and
washboard driving with a sound
like great cracking knuckles

Two to three times a day
I change water for the birds
Yesterday, one male housefinch
perched on the bird feeder--

> the apostrophe inherent everywhere
> his red begging you to know something
> had been left out--

he stopped and suddenly split
one moment which he held apart.

Today it was a red-shafted flicker.

Frank Rossini

flute

when the bamboo sings clouds
cast giants
against rimrock water
curves stone
into deep
bowls trees
rock
like bodies exhausted
in love or a child falling in
to his first
dream
when the bamboo sings
white
moth flickers
in the mimosa
smoke from fields of cut

grass domes
the sky corn
dried in the sun blossoms red
wine on the tongue
when the bamboo
sings
two horses lean their great
heads across a road-
side fence mosquitoes
hum against their skin seeking
the moon's blood

when the bamboo sings the dead
pass through our sleep nudge
us awake
listen

Stacie Smith-Rowe

MONK'S LIFE

This is a monk's life
but the season makes me wild.
Travel is proscribed
but the need for flight remains
and so I lose myself
in a solitary coral bloom
three paces from my door.
I am called to silence
but the quince
has gone mad with glory.
Shall I expect less of myself?
There is nothing to report
by way of news today
beyond the rising up of jonquils,
the ecstasy of daphne and quince.
I have taken vows
but the indigo crocus
undoes them.

THE FISH IN MY DREAM

Spawning continents of thought,
the fish in my dream
moved upstream, pulled
toward where it was born,
pulled over the rocks
to where it was spawned.
It could leap cascades
in response to the urge
to die birthing.
In the dream
men with picks and shovels came.
Trained to look for ancient things,
they found chunks of old macadam,
tiny plastic arms, stuff
that will never sink or burn.
They found us in postures
signifying this:
some bullying beast
was upon us so fast
we had no chance to hide.
In the dream
they rested from digging
and talked about fairness
and what to make of our demise.
One of them said "even a fish
should have a fighting chance
against the hook."

Stacie Smith-Rowe

MOON DREAM

The moon coming up
the color of a woman's
monthly blood
changing as it rises
growing paler
more like silver
the higher it climbs,
causing the ebb and flow
of all the world's juices;
the floodstage of the Nile
no more no less
than the wet dreams
of a celibate.

Itself genderless
the moon coming up
and going down
its light incidental
to that other thing it does;
creating the pulsing
push and pull
of gender's tide,
making us weak
as it wanes, strong
as it waxes, at the mercy
of its round radiance
embracing
that we may not drown.

WAITING WITH LIBBY

Over Yoncalla one hawk glides
in widening circles higher each time.
Libby and I would lie as if dead,
hoping maybe hawks would think us meat,
hoping they would swoop down
so we could see them eye to eye.
Our small girl bodies
wooing down the hawks,
waiting like that to see
the fierce wild beast.
One summer day we scattered
grain and grass along a path
to coax a big black horse
to come and let us ride.
Hawks ignored us, horses never came.
But I remember days that pulsed
with heat and silence,
days that lifted us away.

Stacie Smith-Rowe

"CRICKETS SHRILL ALL NIGHT LONG"

Crickets shrill all night long
nourishing the darkness where I live
so why should I labor to tell you
my real name when it would not
even feed a snake?

The coyotes have moved deeper
into the hills but the crickets stay
saying over and over again
"it is real! it is real!
it is real!"

Hugo, summer '88

Sophie Crawford

RAVINE

I.
Was it July or August
when we spun toward wheat-
colored country
on yellow and silver bicycles?

We lay in the sun, shredding brown weeds.
We drank cheap beer
and he told me about his first time.
"She's not afraid of sex."

The last drop slid to my tongue.
I flung the bottle into a ditch.
Pine needles skittered up -- the wind
was cold on my sunburned arms.
I threw a handful of stones
where crows rasped the falling air.

II.
My footsteps barely press the dirt road.
The darkness is a nylon cave
around my body.
I look into the hollow, where slopes converge:
You could roll a body down this hill
until it stopped.

From the back tunnel under trees,
bouyant laughter fades--
like the night I got drunk
and kissed a South African tourist.
Even in his arms, by the twisting
fire, I shivered.

Sophie Crawford

LETTER TO ISAAC SINGER, CHILDREN'S AUTHOR

I was raised on dead languages, too
old man.
The language of the voice:
it wouldn't speak.
The language of the eyes:
they never looked up.
The language of the body:
it was afraid to move.

Your children live in a world
of sidelocks and gaberdine, droshkies,
yeshivas. Or the milk of a she-goat
to feed a boy's dwindling hunger
in a blizzard.

You gave me a rich man
greedy enough to believe teaspoons give birth
and a silver candlestick died.
As a child, I wondered where the wooden
blue-faced dog I woke to one morning
came from. At seventeen,
I laughed.

Now I search the grass around tombstones
for a shard of colored wax
or paper we might have dropped
the day the ancestors let us make rubbings
of their names.

You gave me Rachel and Menaseh,
like Jonah's children
catching the oil-slick tongue
as it shrinks back,
lighting the Sabbath
on scraps of newsprint
floating down
after Hitler's bomb.

Before you return to the earth
with your olive branch,
look at me.

The smell of smoke in late afternoon
is my sabbath.
Light from distant windows in the dark
my candelabrum.

Sophie Crawford

FOR MY FATHER, 1930-1974

With afternoon wind and sun,
you cannot drag your toes
through moist grit
or call one bird whistle
from another.
You can't feel them
suck air
and swallow.
You will not pull nectar from
dandelions or watch
the dun bird chase the striped one
in hops across a fence.
In the grass, a bird
is hooded, facing light.
Another wings dark and light
toward a stranger's roof.

Alice Marie Evans

GRANDFATHER EAGLE

What's this you' re trying to tell me, now that you are ten years dead, and this unbridgeable distance between?

In memory, I drive the old highway, which you built in Roosevelt days, into the mountains of Kentucky, where kudzu grows and trees meet above blacktop in green tunnels, but no road I take now will bring me any closer to where you never were. You who were ghost in the flesh when I knew you, one of God's frozen people, have come into my dreams seven times in recent months, to look at me in silence and show me polished figurines, bookcases, a Grandfather's clock.

Time, Grandfather, speeds in mid-life in the great swooshes of a race car, eating up highways. A year now like six months seemed five years ago, and five years is two years if it's a day.

Grandfather, there you stand in my dream, silently beside bookcases. I examine their emptiness, I notice the fine craftsmanship with which they were made, I admire the figured grain of the red cherry, polished to a high shine. I listen to the clock silently echo the knowledge that I, who was reading books at four, newspapers at five, who knew at seven that I was born to be a writer, am now middle-aged, and I have written no books, my words instead are scattered from bedroom to kitchen to study, stored in file drawers, on microfilm and computer discs, awaiting my devotion for completion.

When the dreams came, I searched through two boxes of brittle yellow clips, carefully cut from newspapers by Grandmother Aggie over your entire 50-year career as a highway engineer, her act of devotion, and yours, now being eaten by invisible bugs. Those words clipped so that you would be remembered by someone, and I, that

someone, the one who stores and remembers details, once a reporter myself, am surprised to find how newspapers in your day featured frequent articles on the building and maintenance of roads. Good roads a new product in your time, roads over wagon tracks, Indian paths and game trails. Now, routes for cars and trucks and buses, a way for country dwellers to come into the city to visit loved ones, like we always visited you and Aggie, passages for firemen and policemen on emergency runs, highways for tourists, and for goods going to and fro.

Grandfather, you were a man who could be trusted with lives. You took out the narrow curves on Devil's Hollow Hill, cut back the cliffs to make room for two lanes of traffic, no more head-on collisions, no more early deaths in darkness. On Bark Branch Road, where bridges were hardly more than a couple of planks, where pavement had been eaten away by high waters from a nearby stream, you made it safe for the school bus to pass, twice a day, nine months a year, to gather in the children. Grandfather, when snow fell in winter in great drifts, you were out with your men, plowing and salting at dawn, safeguarding travelers.

You, who took only one vacation in 50 years, two weeks over roads built by other men, from Kentucky to Florida to Washington D.C. and back to the Bluegrass, which you never left again except to visit us, just across the river. Just across the river, Grandfather, over the great bridge to southern Indiana and our little farm, where you went fishing with my brothers in the brown pond my father built and stocked. Fishing, something you wanted to do more of when you retired, you told the reporter at your last interview. Do some fishing, you said, but I remember how you settled down into your green reclining chair to watch TV instead. Grandfather, had you forgotten what still lived beneath the dark water?

Forgotten, Grandfather, so much forgotten already, the

pendulum passes back, forth, the hands sweep a round path from noon to midnight to noon, and though I remember you better than I ever thought possible, it is what I have forgotten about myself, at 36, that catches in my heart. I still want something, Grandfather, I am still waiting for something. But nothing was handed you in your life, either, you made yourself who you were, and you were a man who knew how to get things done in the world. You did not live in dreams, like me, waiting, you knew how to measure the distance between things, one step at a time in order to reach a goal. I am a woman with ideas, they fairly fly from my mind at times they are so fast I barely get a glimpse of them leaving me and sailing off into space, but where is the ground I stand on, how do I capture these ideas and put them to use?

Grandfather, you were a man with blueprints, you brought forth ideas by bulldozer, carried them scoop by scoop out into the light and held them down with gravel and oil, not to be borne away by wind. You, Grandfather, could hold an idea long enough to see it planted in the fertile earth of reality, you tended your garden with precision and love, and never failed to sucker off tomato plants, never let your plants grow so heavy with fruit that their limbs split and died. But my garden is a jungle, and I leave fine, ripe produce to rot on the vines.

Turning in my nightbed, bound by my heavy covers, I peer up at the ceiling of a basement store. A hook dangles from the bottom of a scales in which I weigh vegetables. The scales' round face, its precise measurements, blend with the image of the Grandfather's clock, the scales' dangling hook like the clock's pendulum. Swinging east, west, the hook catches in the clothing covering my chest, and blood and water ooze from a new opening.

Grandfather, you were as stiff and steady and quiet as a man carved from wood, like the wood figurines in my dreams, the kind I used to see in tobacco stores every time I went shopping for your birthday present.

I sought memories in those shops, smelling again aromas of sweet pipe tobaccos and strong Kentucky chew, again reading the names of cigars you once smoked: De Palma Throw-outs, Sweet Rum Crookettes, Marsh Wheeling DeLuxe, White Owl Miniatures. I saw again the dark brown twist of tobacco hanging from the ceiling in your attic, and the hook, caught in my chest.

Grandfather, though steady and quiet when I knew you, my mother says when she was young she feared above all else the word "Thunderation" exploding from your chest.

During the Great Depression, when you taught engineering at UK and hated it, the standing up before people, the talking, the presentation, you, like me a serious introvert, you took to drink, my mother said, you kept a whiskey bottle hidden in the basement, and once, when she tried to block your way, you knocked her down stairs, and she, just a child, even now, when she remembers.

Grandmother forbade you to drink, said you never could go in any more bars, said you were an alcoholic, but I believe that good Christian woman would have thought that anyone who drank even one glass of spirits a sinner, so soon then after Prohibition, and many a Kentucky county still dry, even now, in 1989, a few.

Grandmother's lips would have tightened when you approached with the smell of alcohol on your breath. You stopped drinking, Grandfather. There was no room for anger in a house full of women. A wife, two daughters who collapsed in tears at the simplest of curses. Thunderation! Like Zeus hurling thunderbolts at the mortals below, Grandfather, you must have seemed Godlike in your anger. Primal, that masculine anger. And necessary. But you colluded with Grandmother in murdering your wildness, and you became as straight a straight arrow as ever existed, as predictable and straight as an interstate highway.

But something, some thing hidden from light, some dark thing began to grow and swell in that great metal barrel of your chest. Something not so safe as your bridges and roads, something more like the dynamite you used to explode cliffs. Your chest, sealed tight against explosion, your throat a cap of steel.

That dark fruit began leaking through your skin, spreading angry red sores over arms and legs that itched and plagued you for years. You tried medicines and sunlamps and sunbaths and whatever anyone said might work, but nothing abated that angry red itch.

The anger sealed inside your chest never exploded in thunderation, became instead an implosion, fifty years breeding and swelling, the aneurysm below your heart as big as a watermelon, your doctor said, bigger than any fruit ever grown in your garden.

A new dream washes ashore, the bobber on my fishing line plunges beneath the water, a great fish pulls at the hook, surfaces, drags my pole out into the pond. I run along the shoreline, hoping to free the fish, but this one frees itself. Intelligent, this fish almost as big as me, perhaps it has something to say. Grandfather, Grandfather Eagle, will you not help me scoop my fish from this dark water?

Grandfather Eagle,
I see you circling
a ring of purple rocks,
careful always to stay clear of
the fire in the center.
You raise your eagle wings,
you lower them,
and together we dance,
while fire light
throws shadows
on the red rocks.

Step by step
we measure out the distance
on my path, the road I am building
around this circle
of rainbow rocks.
Deliberately, you show me how to
raise and lower
raise and lower
wings
teaching me to keep my
feet on earth
until muscles are strong
and can bring me back down.

Grandfather,
I teach you
to breathe, to trust
the strength found in darkness.

You, my companion now
on this bridge we build together
between
darkness and light.

Chip Goodrich

WEARINESS

Muscles and bones
can only turn over
so much garden. The heart
would never quit.

At dusk, all the long shadows
become one shadow,
I give up digging,
lean my good spade by the door,
go inside and slump down on the sofa

like Uncle John
summer evenings on the farm
after a hard day in the fields,
lying on the couch in his dusty clothes
as quiet as a bale of straw.

I don't want to eat supper yet.
I don't want to wash up, or talk,
or try to pencil out once again
how my labor might finally outwork my debts.

I just want to lie still
in this dark house
with all the other farmers
and hod carriers and factory stiffs
who've hauled their jobs another long day
to gather with me here
in this tired body
and rest.

Gary L. Lark

TRAIL CAMP

Morning begins with the hoo-
hoo-hoo of grouse.
The busy quiet,
above the falls
where the dark moss
hides the stream bed,
settles like wings
among spruce and noble fir.

The mark of our camp,
on top of others, leaves a scar.
As long as we come
the scar will remain.
By mid-morning we've set our pace,
two miles of switchbacks still ahead.

FISHING

Standing thigh deep
in the Yachats river
the fly drifting under a shadow
I wear my father's shirt.
His body in mine
I in his shirt
our hands move
in similar patterns.

I've the turn of his mouth
in my reflection.
Our language is mostly silence,
but somehow from his father
to me there comes this patchwork
of sensations.

The river swirls
around my knees
tugging me downstream
under the trees.
A long quiet pool.
A cutthroat takes the fly
and three arms set the hook.

Tina Tau

THE ROAD OUT

It is a long road out
of the axe-carved Alaska clearing,
abandoning the red-roofed shack
thick with riches and an animal smell,
lamp-lit and curled around a monster stove:
Baba Yaga's cottage, alert and troublesome,
hunkered on hen's legs.
    Here we let off fireworks
    at Christmas that fizzed and whistled
    in the snow. The dogs
    chased and ate them, spitting.
    Brilliant, silent streams of white,
    purple, green light rippled in sheets over the pole:
    voices down the roadless valley
    shouted at the sky.

Leaving the unruly hut
as thieves might cache a jewel in a tree,
we take a dirt track out
between sweeping, spongy
tundra hills--through
country big, and old, and cold enough
to break your heart. Creatures
cross the road: a wolf, two caribou,
an owl. The hills they melt into--
green, cloud-shadowed, ripe with berries--
stir a wild willingness in me to disappear,
to leave the car, the road and where it leads
and find my way here.
I lie face-down in bright twisted bushes,
the long smells swelling up like water from
frozen ground. I dream the
first folk to hunt here,
cupping their hands at spring and snowmelt,
breathe out, and I breathe in.

The first two thousand miles
wind south through hills
of paper birch, soft stands of withered spruce,
cold companies of mountains without names.
Fireweed's dusty spires blaze the road,
permafrost carves jolts and hollows.
The north's stark flavor,
ice and light, bites deep into the continent--
and then the road begins to fray,
with fields, side roads and fences
like the low first stir of pain.

POETRY REVIEW: Lex Runciman, The Admirations

Close observation and a scrupulous rendering of physical detail mark these poems by Lex Runciman collected in The Admirations (Lynx House Press, 1989). The poems are rich in detail. The details are carefully chosen. Familiar details. There is the "television's dull gray face"; there is the "yellow pencil lettering in the squares" of a cross-word puzzle, and there is, lying somewhere out in a field, "a cordovan oxford cracking in heat." Or there are odd details that send the poem off at an unexpected tangent: the car bumper which after impact with a powerpole is "now an arrow / through the radiator's green and leaky heart." There are whole processions of detail:

> Picture a breakfast table,
> toast with strawberry preserves,
> coffee steaming in a red porcelain cup,
> an endless procession of red hens
> fired around its side.

The details are so meticulously drawn as to give absolute veracity to the picture they compose. Moreover, they lend authority to the voice that is speaking.

In the first poem of the book a visibly distraught man on a bus speaks of "our drift towards disaster" (with reference to his fear of nuclear holocaust) and this theme is amplified throughout the book. There are many disasters mentioned--real and imagined. The Kennedy assassination is in here, as is the Vietnam War; there is an account of visiting a brother in a hospital ICU, and there is oblique reference to Pearl Harbor, as well as a poem about the disaster called childhood. But even more vivid and moving are the imagined disasters. In one poem the narrator imagines his daughter being run over by a truck. In

another he envisions a fatal car collision to account for a power outage in his home on a peaceful Saturday morning. In a third he dreams his house has burned down and he is afraid to wake,

> choking on the dry powder of ash,
> desperate for my family, desperate
> to know what, if anything, can be saved.

Central to the book is a poem which details a painting by the 17th-century Dutch master Jan Vermeer. Like Vermeer and the Dutch School, these poems depict scenes from contemporary life. They are very composed. They are also very bürgerlich, very bourgeois poems, resplendent with the banal details of everyday life. In one poem the narrator says, waving to a neighboring apartment-dweller:

> We cannot be sure we see her
> past that glass, confused as it is
> by our reflected selves waving.

Which is a painterly touch worthy of the Old Masters.

It's not so much the emotional tone of the poems that appeals to me, as it is the writing itself. The writing is wonderful; it is accurate to the point of finesse. Runciman teaches writing skills at Oregon State University and he is clearly an accomplished practitioner of what he teaches. His handling of difficult scenes is very adroit. There is an amazing poem called "Fathers and Infants" in which the speaker is in a department store watching a prizefight on television ("on 17 separate screens-- / I counted them between rounds"). At the same time he is babysitting his infant son in a stroller while his wife is off shopping. Accompanying him are five other male bystanders. The contrast between the larger scene in the store and the small scene on the TV screens is

sharply drawn. Finally the wife returns from shopping, bestows a kiss on both father and son, and they all leave, but not before the father catches a glimpse of Muhammed Ali on the screen,

> standing second row ringside,
> grinning, waving a towel over his head.
> He knows a sad fight when he sees one.
> Ali, Ali, Ali, Ali, you can read his chanting lips
> and the crowd's with him. He's leading his
> own cheers.

Poem after poem sparkles with detail: escalator stairs that "rise and slide flat under the seamless floor"; the boatmen in Winslow Homer's painting who sing "like deranged Protestants"; the incredibly vivid (but entirely imaginary) trip that the narrator goes on to account for the power outage; the uncanny description of a woman who has been stopped by a cop for a traffic infraction (as told by a narrator sitting drunk in a canvas chair half a block away!); and the anecdote of the neighboring apartment-dweller, "the gray, spiteful woman / in 106, the corner unit," who suddenly one July evening starts madly polishing a curbside derelict--the car that has been abandoned for months in front of her apartment. Of this abandoned car the narrator says:

> We consider it,
> if at all, like landscape, something
> there, like her, local, mildly strange.

These interesting, authentic poems bear witness to the fact that we are all of us on this planet trapped in these awkward, somewhat embarrassing bodies that are drifting towards major medical disaster. In the meantime there are crossword puzzles, hairdresser appointments, child-rearing, the paintings of Vermeer, and heavyweight title bouts on TV to occupy us. Runciman's poems are emblematic of our situation. They are, like landscape, there--local, mildly strange.

Clem Starck

Note: The Admirations won the Oregon Book Award for poetry in 1989. An earlier book of Runciman's poetry, Luck, was published by Owl Creek Press (Missoula, Montana) in 1981.

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

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STACIE SMITH-ROWE, Hugo, is a painter who took an undergraduate course from William Stafford: "I've continued to write poetry ever since that most fortunate choice of electives."

CLEM STARCK, Dallas, only needed a nudge to write admiringly about a fellow Oregon poet. A carpentry chapbook and another larger typescript are seeking a publisher.

TINA TAU, Newberg, lives on a hillside, worked as a teacher, archeologist and book-binder and cook. She is working on a short fantasy novel for children.

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