

Fireweed

Poetry of Western Oregon

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FIREWEED

Fireweed: Poetry of Western Oregon is published quarterly, featuring fall, winter, spring, and summer issues each year. *Fireweed* publishes poets living in the western half of Oregon, though poems need not be regional in subject. Manuscripts should include a return envelope with sufficient postage. Inquiries about submission of reviews or essays are welcome. Please be sure to include a biographical note with your poems or your prose.

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Send *Fireweed* email to jazzpo@iccom.com

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Tim Van Ert

READING YOU REMINDS ME

when bored stuffed with crinkling
carton-peanuts thoughts
I may borrow fresh thinking
for just a few bucks.

Brain dark as last year's glads
forgotten beneath the weeds
gets to follow your spade
to a symmetry of color it needs.

Sometimes I forget how we work
for one another.

THE YOUNG POET LIVES CHEAPLY IN
A CHEAP APARTMENT

The young poet is perverse
as often as he can be (which isn't often) – usually

when he makes a joke.

Once, the young poet wrote,
“his penis like the knife hanging from Mishima Yukio's belly,” just so he could stop
tugging at his broken zipper that only zipped up.

Outside, the communal balcony was hanging from the entranceway;
the night was very still.

HE IS SECRETLY A MEDICAL STUDENT

The young poet is a terror-bird.

The young poet writes, “as Prometheus turned
his face away from the secret, second bird
condemned to bloodying itself against a rock
each time his liver grew back,” because

the young poet's wattle is like red candle wax poured on a cadaver's wri

He just sets the joke up & waits.

WORLD HISTORY

1

Chinese chronicles show Yong Lo
seizing his murdered nephew's throne.
Japan's more delicate emperor bets
that art in China will come to a bad end.
He corners all Chinese lacquer found
in his domain. Among his shrewd
offerings to the new Lord of China:
a red cup carved by a lacquer master
long-forgotten in Beijing. Yong Lo,
enthralled by its spiral flutings, orders troops
to eastern China, charged with inviting
the artist to court. Nothing written
spells out his chagrin on learning
the long-dead carver can't accept.

2

Courtiers prize the labored crust, time
and lives sealed in resin, layer on layer
of sap bled into copper buckets hanging
from gashed lacquer trees. *Rhus verniciflua*
pays out poison, burns
wrinkled hands of boys brushing on
the hundred layers of a rouge-pot. Fumes
burn the lungs of little boys
who water cold walls of drying-cellars,
and vapor-rooms filling with red
trays, red boxes and cups, red urns.
Lacunae mar the record:
robbers believe rumors that the lacquer
covers gold. They crack red carvings
for buried treasure, find pot-metal or hemp,
silk at best, puttied over with pitch,
pig's blood, oil of tea, and ash.

3

For the eight-sided box, a carver chooses
clouds to ring the drum and circulate
on the cover, a rain-screen blessing goods
spilled within, ripening. A sweet notion,
this, but where the first scholar
now reads clouds, a second finds
the usurper's sign, sword guards, concentric,
interlocked. A thick-wrought scheme
in either case: the rustic Yuan court
refuses clean Song curves. It likes
quick snaky humps, cuts, angles,
prolix mock-brocades. Patterns collide
on the box, coil and strike the empty space.
The carver thinks of seeding
a dry field with rain. He's a king
summoning the dead. He crisscrosses
every blade, clouding the unbroken ground.

VARIATIONS ON PINK

i.

In passing today I said,
"The color in the Sea of Japan
is pea-green like your painting."
You dipped the brush again,
blurred the petals on the geranium.

ii.

The Chinese ideogram for color
has its origins in two persons
having sex. And a wild
horse runs through history,
snorting, panting.

iii.

Hugged between my mother's thighs,
I pushed the plastic tug boat
up down
up down
in the bathtub.

iv.

The harbor market
has everything slimy:
octopuses, eels,
pig snouts, blood-eyed fish,
a rubber merman
in a red wind-breaker.

v.

Hokusai's beauty
stretching on the dark shore
dreams a giant octopus
out of the ocean.

A FEW METERS OF DIRT

surrounded by the
homes
of dentists and doctors,

gardens of sculptured trees
heavy with tangerines,

the cabbage plot
sours
their shadows.

the handkerchief farmer
stoops row to row
pinching off
invaders

who, at any
moment,
would take over

SHRINKING WITH PROGRESS

Her face
 a dynastic map
 unfolded and creased
according
 to growing seasons

taut from tending
generations of
perfect daikon

her spine
finds no purchase
harvesting
ice cream wrappers
planted by
traffic

NOODLE HOUSE

he ladles from the one
that's been sitting

 overdone udon
 bloated
 like soggy *unagi*

these limp eels
rest on the silt

2 green skin scallions
break the fat sheen

if it's good enough
for cabbies'
slumping appreciation –

sapporo

arigato

ANOTHER NOODLE HOUSE

the electronic eye
blinks
and the women
stumble
across the threshold

steaming bowls
poised lip level
the cab drivers
stop
mid-sip –

too big
for a table
that usually fits

it teeters
like a dory
on a reef

and the fishermen
at the bottom of their bowls
poised to poke
out an eye

or skewer
a lip

THE FOREST OF TAKE SORROW

*We do not have to be long in the woods to experience
the...impression of going deeper and deeper into
a limitless world.*

Gaston Bachelard

Road ends in a ruin of boulders,
narrows through second growth,
then the silver firs divide us to one
and then only along the rocky path.

North slope in brief heat, the trees veiled
in moss, as if the life of the forest
were something else, the silence of trees open
and listening, each twig crack belling the air.

This is the stillness after the heart is poured
and poured, the peace of the eye,
the ear drumming the tick, tick, tick
of needles over the forest floor.

I did not come to be here, to endure
this infinity like a fresh wound.
I want to break out in the open,
see the icy end of the earth avalanche

in the heat of the sun,
to be lifted into the life of the wind.
Not this forest of sisters singing,
not these branches ending in air.

REDEEMING THE THISTLE

As Claire and my mother climb stone steps
in our garden, they recapture names I might
have called my children in a fairy tale:
Lithodora, Penstemon, Coreopsis Moonbeam.

They stare at my neighbors' front yard:
morning glory around roses, blackberries ripe
in the plum tree, quack grass bursting
through concrete, a few seeds on bent
dandelion stems. Worst of all, the thistle.

*Grab a paper bag and get over there. Cover
those flowers before they go to seed.
Chop the bottom and cart that thistle away!*
They nod and look at me.

Later, I pull my own crabgrass,
dandelions, a little oxalis. No thistles.
I remember my neighbors work long hours,
sometimes sleep at their office, afraid
their microfilm company will fail.

I cross the street to inspect the pariah:
tall...needle-spiked.
Brown flowers like bristles. Soft
purple down at the tip.

TRIANGULATION

The instruments of precision
Await a useful chart. Compass,
Dividers, straightedge.

I have seen the Susquehanna in Spring
And imagine it now in late Summer, the water
Low and sluggish, maples still green, fields

Already disked for Fall. So when
My father called and asked had I heard
From you, I could explain:

You had not been there long
And would report in once your routines
Were sure. I thought of him in Ojai,

Looking westward past the dark
Oak hills, a hazy purple ridge faint
In the late evening light. Out

There, beyond sight, is the sea;
And as the air cools, fog threads
Over the hills into his valley,

Spreading as the sun recedes.
He thinks about you now, and sees
Something, wishes he had more

Time to watch. In Portland,
Where we study the forecasts daily
For the usual onset of rain,

I sight east and south, down two legs
Of that triangle that fixes the location of my heart,
Thankful while the clear weather holds.

September 1998

LOBOTOMETTES

Young women with little on
But cutting beauty
In bodies of slender wisdom

When not before my eyes
Behind them
With the nicotine and alcohol

Lightly salted
Coquette surgeons in lipstick
Severing
Top from bottom

ASPHASIA FISHES FROM THE PIER

The sea transformed by lesser light,
the line she throws by hand
now not visible, Asphasia stands
with a towel snugged
around her waist and thighs,
a tee shirt on top, boxy, white,
her short hair gleamed flat
by salt of the sea. She could be
anything – male, female, hermaphrodite –
doing any of a thousand magic tasks
at seaside, now that the sun
has gone down behind gold-brushed domes
and tile roofs of Ermoupolis.

Minutes ago in her bikini –
even with the square bulk of her midriff –
she was breast-heavy and buttock-wide
female. Daughter of Aphrodite,
risen from the Aegean in olive dark skin.
Bait out, bait in: Asphasia draws
hand over hand, toward her, the thing
withheld from a naked eye – her body
swathed in cloth like white foam.
The sea surrounding this city of Hermes
turns glassy, its blue tricked into
peach skin by disappearing light.

Transformed by absorption, she stands
caught in what flows toward
the pull of her fingers, what flies
out to the sea with an arc of her arm.
A sleek child who now dives in,
a cat who purrs down the concrete steps,
a shouted *Yasas* from the taverna above:
all immaterial. Only the sea
and Asphasia, only a thread transparent
running from each to each.

TO ASTERIA'S BUTTERFLIES

Now the calendar turns beyond
July's center. Now the breeze turns
hard and horizontal. Suddenly
the air along this Aegean shore

is flecked with the path
of orange butterflies – wind dippers,
their flight as strictly uneven
as the surface of this sea.

What hatched you this late, little flowers
of the air? With heat of Cycladic sun
to force you on, what held you
inside a cocoon this long?

Since early May, girls
have come here daily to swim,
unwrapping themselves
from blouses and thick beach towels,

emerging in jewels of bikini,
their olive skin and black hair slicked
by dips into and out of
the sea. Where were you then?

What blossom spread itself wide enough
to lure you out? What yellow dust,
what wild butter unfurled
your wings into flight?

ROOMS TO LET DREAM

So says a sign
on a harbor hotel
of an island city
named for Hermes.

So say the rooms
behind numbered doors
hermetic against
untimely waking.

From each door's
quicksilver knob
hang the words
Do Not Disturb –

magic posted
to safekeep
those winged bouquets
delivered in sleep.

A CYCLADIC PROOF

Those who doubt
the ancient salt

of this sea
need only

watch their drying skin
glint, their limbs

turn to pale marble in
Agean sun.

EXHIBIT FOR THE PROSECUTION

it is easy to maintain
an exalted perspective
sitting on the city bus
behind some poor mad fool
carrying on
like an overdrive stanza from *Howl*
that perhaps such spectacles
provide a raw glimpse
into the ultimate nothing

but would I be subject to arrest
for contemplating a necessary evil
to keep in check the greater good?

just because they invented the wheel
doesn't mean you need to use it

what I mistook
for a bird in distress
was just a limb
full of dead leaves
flapping in the winter wind

will there ever
be enough truth
and beauty
to go around?

thinking has a trajectory
swinging a bat
a definite point
of no return
and there it goes
"Oops!"
another idea
shot out into space

STRUCTURES

The central district of a city (pop. 121,000), characterized by one-story retail shops, with occasional larger, glassy structures; a cobblestoned shopping area picks up nearby. It's a seasonal winter day, hard and cold.

i am struck walking down the street
writing a poem in my head about myself
by these words which i know to be inane:

little red leaf
knows no ode

the wind gusts past the winter cars
and the people in heavy coats with packages and cold lit in their faces,
as these words turn in mind.
where did they come from? what was i
thinking or being made to know
by the world, to lead to it. to this
somewhat annoying windblown leaf?

*

it was a day of errands.
in a light and air of cold,
a pleasant gray bareness
to the trees. a few tattered ones still
flagging the sun.

Browsing a local well of thought...

at the bookstore i wandered the colors
and icons. Penguin orange. a run of white-spined Shakespeare
paperbacks. sporadic black Knopfs, episodic
through the spectrum of the little store.
some Spanish guitar, as if from the tomes themselves.
look – a new title, in whose story lives, by the blurb, a mind
of gray-green city parks and sad attachments, a flood-
ing drama of love and neurochemistry.
then out of literature, into the fire: Latin America
danced before (a lot of reds here no
kidding)...human rights work, the meaning of accomplishment...
idle dillydallying, apparently, for quickly i
passed back into poetry's thin spines
by the door, where arctic drafts leak in
over pages made to last...
forms clear because they are cold.

*A major thoroughfare gathers traffic now; people flowing downtown, autos
into the wealthy forested hills.*

out in the world again near mid-day,
a pedestrian among many, among these
forms of recurrent breath,
and pavement, and the gritty leaves that cling
together as they dissolve, like memories of one's time...

my thoughts now
wrapped in language craft –
poetry,
words,
the feel of
all
that

some leaf a thought-shape, wind giving form
some thoughts, a cloud-shape from some spring sky
some animals you can't track

Downtown: commerce...

in the shop windows where the blue lights dwell
the long cars rippled and slid, the ghosting glass a loneliness
of transparency and persistence, some memory –
the palely sea-wavering arms that reach ahead, to pull one
into the next blue yard;
pedaling – coasting – baroquely down
an old green mountain through Autumn's falling center;
the day's return home in dusk, unreal, windows yellowed from hoping –
a jumble of lookings out and lookings in. my last thought there
was eyes seem emptied and skin thinned,
as if the window were time, not weak reflector –

*These are what will die with me.
The solitudes I've made. Contemplations as
moments, worlds in a floating, flowing eye.*

ungrasping thought on a windblown day.
how much timelessness can you allow?
the abstract as warm in a winter glint
of street and curb, cars and awning, and the same wind
that races shadow across great plains (lifting
it from mountain snows), leaving paths
all over town.

Dennis Muong

YEARS IN A THOUGHT

Did you smell that smell that took you back in time?
Perhaps it was a place where you once were.
Perhaps it was a feeling in your heart.
Like an invisible cluster of bubbles, it bursts for you alone.
You look around. I loved that person, that place.
How strong and tender and fragrant. The heart ached.
The things we love and fear never disappear.
Like the light and heat from a candle flame,
if the fire is extinguished, we hold the image of the flame,
we know how it feels
and the odor of the smoldering wick,
that armor-piercing smell.

Two From 26 Books

Blindsided, by Chris Semansky and 2 1/2 *Bridges* by Douglas Spangle are recent chapbooks in Portland poet Dan Raphael's publishing venture 26 Books (26 books by 26 writers of 26 pages each). Both books are strong entries in the series, sophisticated in voice and in craft. Reading the poems silently is interesting enough, but one discovers that reading them aloud reveals all kinds of musical enjoyments as the body gets more into the act.

Semansky's book is the nineteenth element in the 26 Books series. Beginning with the Foucault epigraph in the first poem ("Takes"), we get a whiff of post-modernism that appears to be characteristic of the poet's work – "What we see never resides in what we say." The poem in ten numbered sections (or *takes*) begins with Number Ten:

10: Thinking words the body of thought. A table. On the table a script. In the script directions. For the characters, there is no plot (usually). They do not think of themselves as characters (usually). How do they think of themselves?

and proceeds toward Number One:

1: Cut.

Corollaries of the Foucault statement can be found in various quarters of the surrealist movement whose vision informs much of the work in *Blindsided*. "Andre Breton Works the Crisis Prevention Hotline" provides a loud example:

First thing he does is kick the other workers out. Then he records a toilet flushing, plays it back for each call.

"What a life..." he sighs, dreaming of lunch: a roast chicken plump in the throat of a bicycle....

Dreamlike images that call to mind De Chirico, Dali, Ernst – painters who give concrete body to the surrealist vision – are employed to great effect in *Blindsided*. In "Sleeping on Your Side Too Much," we see

*... Your dog slides
into your neighbor's cat, then your car
into their yard, even your house is sliding
across town, plunking into topless bars
full of priests, who have backslid out
of their confessionals along with the sinners...*

Blindsided is fresh in its artistically serious playfulness – "funny" questions, conundrums, games, black humor, and the like. "Youngest Brother of Brothers" begins

*I hit a kid. Wham. right through the windshield and into my lap.
Chunks of glass stick in my cheek. He's about eight, and the
better part of his right ear has been ripped off by the crash. He's
moaning and his legs are jerking like he's underwater.*

Sounds grim, but things work out in a naturally marvelous way.

Douglas Spangle's 2 1/2 *Bridges* is a younger brother of Semansky's book, being the 23rd element in 26 Books publisher Raphael's "new alphabet of contemporary poetries arising in the Northwest...."

Indeed he lives! – Walt Whitman, that is:

*I struck a pose
at first self-consciously
as I watched my shadow,
then more and more naturally:
the three of wands:
chin on my walking stick, staring westward
where the river holds commerce with the open ocean.
"Under Astoria Bridge"*

EDITORS' NOTES

For those interested in getting more involved, or staying involved, in issues related to poetry and poetry writing in our time, the Mountain Writers Center, at 3624 SE Milwaukie Avenue in Portland, offers continuous opportunities for satisfaction. One (or more) such opportunity might be found in the Mountain Writers Lecture Series: Poetry at the End of the Millennium, announced in the Center's Winter 2000 newsletter. Scheduled to open the series of talks on Saturday, February 26 is poet Lynn Emanuel with "Poetry and Landscapes: Places & Things at the End of the Millennium." Other outstanding poets who will lecture in the series are Bruce Smith, Robert Wrigley, Maggie Anderson, and Tony Hoagland. Smith will present a lecture titled "Poetry and Jazz" on April 15 at 10 AM.

The aim of the series is "to foster a dialogue on cultural issues and poetic works that continue to influence poets writing today." We're certain that the Center hopes the Saturday morning times of these lectures will prove convenient for out-of-towners as well as their nearer neighbors. Some of the poets will be giving readings, craft lectures, and workshops besides dealing with the lecture series topic.

Readers should notice that the newsstand price of *Fireweed* is now \$4.00, our first price rise since the 1989 inception of the magazine. One-year subscriptions remain the bargain they have always been at \$10.00.

CONTRIBUTORS

CASEY BUSH Portland, is a chess player and author of the biography *Grand Master from Oregon* (1991) as well as the chapbook *Blessing of Madness* (1994)

DAVID FILER lives and writes in Portland. This is his first appearance in *Fireweed*.

GLEN GRAVES a Vietnam veteran (1969-70), lives and writes in Grants Pass. At California State University at Long Beach, he majored in psychology.

ANNE GRIFFIN a Portland artist, teaches painting and art theory at Pacific Northwest College of Art.

PHYLLIS MANNAN Portland, received a 1998 Oregon Literary Arts Fellowship in Poetry. She has had work in *Willow Springs* and *The Oregonian*.

SHANE MCCRAE Salem, appeared in the Winter '99 *Fireweed*. He is presently a student at the University of Oregon, majoring in Medieval Studies.

ELIZABETH MCLAGAN Portland, is a teacher and free-lance writer who has been published in *Calyx*, *Barnabe Mountain Review*, *Willow Springs* and other journals. One of her poems is included in the recent anthology *Portland Lights*.

DENNIS MOUNG is coordinator for the Heritage Museum in Independence, Oregon and a student at Linfield College. He is a second generation Chinese-American.

PAULANN PETERSEN is a recently retired teacher, living in Portland. Her work has appeared in *Poetry*, *The New Republic*, and *Atlantic*, among other venues. *Portland Lights* includes one of her poems.

BEN SHARVY lives and writes in Eugene.

TIM VAN ERT Independence, has taught alternative college classes "Medicine in Poetry" and "Dreams: the Neglected Theater of Consciousness." His poems have appeared in *Medicinal Purposes*, *Poetry Motel*, *Main Street Rag*, and *Slightly West*.

REGINA WEAVER Portland, earned her MFA in creative writing at the University of British Columbia. She teaches ESL at Portland State University. Her work has appeared in *Antigonish Review*, *A Room of One's Own*, and *The Lyric*.

LAURA WINTER Portland, is the editor of the uniquely packaged *Take Out*. Her poems have appeared in *Northwest Literary Forum*, *Talus & Scree*, *Rain City Review*, and other journals.

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