

# FIREWEED

POETRY OF WESTERN OREGON



VOLUME TWO  
NUMBER THREE

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# FIREWEED

## POETRY OF WESTERN OREGON



FIREWEED: POETRY OF WESTERN OREGON is published quarterly in October, January, April, and July. FIREWEED publishes poets living in the western half of Oregon, though poems need not be regional in subject. Manuscripts should include a return envelope and material for a contributor's note. Inquiries about submission of reviews or essays are welcome. Subscriptions are \$10 for four issues. All contents copyrighted 1991 by FIREWEED, 1330 E. 25th Ave., Eugene, OR. 97403.

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Vincent A. Wixon

### COYOTES

When Andrew Turner's dog took off  
Andrew was thinking about Martha.  
At the bark and the dog's feet throwing gravel,  
Andrew Turner looked up from the porch.  
Out over the grass coating the hills he saw  
a low tan shape traversing a slope  
and another behind it about twenty yards.  
He yelled, "Butch, you come back here! Right now!"  
The dog made a wide turn  
and circled back under the pasture fence.  
Andrew looked again at the pair,  
who hadn't altered their pace or the distance between.  
Every evening they loped by in no great hurry.  
They didn't scare, didn't change pace,  
knew where they were going,  
and they were nearly the color of Martha's hair.

Jim Shugrue

### EACH AND EACH

This is dumb I know it,  
but dumb is my native language.  
For instance, tonight  
the pink and yellow suburban girls  
who ask me to buy their underage beer  
remind me how, twenty years ago,  
tough-acting high school sophomores,  
we paid winos to get us quarts.  
And faster than it takes  
to tell them no, I remember  
Charlie Stark, dumping me  
on the doorstep, ringing the bell  
and running, and my mother  
holding my head under the cold  
water tap in the kitchen while  
she cursed every male in our family  
back to Adam by name, and a few  
of the females too. We were brought up  
to be quick to take offence, and to live  
insulting lives. Then I remember  
one drunk who took our seven-fifty  
and sat drinking glass after glass  
until it was gone, and we couldn't go in  
after him, or they'd call the cops.  
Thirty beers 'til closing, and he wouldn't  
even notice if we stuck around  
to beat him up.

### THE MORNING TALKS

The morning talks to itself out loud.  
Silence plays like a record on the turntable  
moon, the shadow of silver, the echo of gold,  
an old drunk mumbling new names  
for all the animals and vegetables.  
Three young men singing on the corner  
a love song to death. It's dawn --  
another holy day, another goddamn  
holy day. I brush the ashes from  
my vestments, stick my face  
under my arm to see  
whether I smell too human  
and head down to the sacrifice.

Joan Dobbie

THREE WEEKS AFTER MY FATHER DIED

Part I

About a month or so  
before he died  
my father  
started not liking  
the black cat

or maybe he'd never  
liked her. I couldn't  
be sure. I'd been gone  
for almost seven years. Moved back  
just in time to be  
with him a little. I wanted  
to go on trips together,  
try the mountains,  
back roads  
we'd never been on, but  
he was too tired by then, I guess  
busy  
with his dying, though no one said  
that's what it was  
I should have known.

Three days after  
my father died  
a thin black tom  
came into my house,  
slept on the rug  
beside my bed, tore at the door  
when I put him out --  
I was just about to give in,  
let him stay  
when he disappeared. I don't  
know what that means

about my father. (At home  
the old black she-cat sleeps  
as always  
on my mother's lap.)

Three weeks after  
my father's death (on a light warm  
yellow afternoon  
and the Jewish New Year)

my mother and I  
went out  
to the grave, which was still  
an open sore  
of rough dirt, no stone,  
not a blade of grass  
yet growing.

And we stood together  
in that quiet sun  
in silence.

Part II

There was movement  
on the heap of ground  
that marked  
my father's grave. A black  
armored beetle  
with dark transparent wings  
lumbering  
like an old pregnant woman  
over the loose hard chunks  
of graveyard dirt.

Under all that  
dirt, I imagined the face  
that had been my father's  
now belonging to earth, now growing

a soft grey cover  
of mold.

I imagined the beautiful delicate tendrils  
of mold that would be growing unseen  
in the dark  
over my father's face  
like a veil.

Later, at my sister's house,  
another coal black tom  
came over to lie on my chest  
plugging the hole there.

That night in bed I tried to speak  
to my father. I asked him  
what he needed, what he was wanting  
to say to me

in his new mysterious language  
of three  
black cats and a black winged beetle  
and the silence  
of a sunny day.

I put his picture  
by my pillow. I asked him  
to answer me, tonight, in dreams.  
I tucked myself, a little frightened  
into bed, but all night  
no dreams came and I woke  
empty as ever.

I still haven't cried  
for my father.

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Ron Netherton Johnson

WHEN LOREEN GOT PREGNANT,  
SHE READ EVERY BOOK,  
ATTENDED CLASSES.

I went along,  
watched movies of birth,  
learned to breathe.

I'd been married before --  
in the summer camped at Monterey,  
she went off the pill somehow,  
but we said no,  
the world is too awful  
to be born in.  
We were very sensitive  
in those days.

I later dreamt  
of a little boy  
who looked like me.

Here comes Peter Cottontail,  
Loreen said.

Ooh-ah, ooh-ah,  
we breathed together.

The baby popped out,  
a perfect child,  
he, too, breathing confidently.

Let's call him Lucerne, I said.  
A combination of lucid  
and concerned.  
Too businesslike,  
said Loreen.



## OLD FARM IN FOREST GROVE

I remember father stringing up  
double insulated TV wire  
to an aluminum antenna high in a Doug fir  
for better reception.

And once, for better traction in a snowstorm,  
he backed his Hudson up the steep, narrow road,  
opened the wide sedan door for better vision.  
Five or six, I opened mine, too,  
the unmanageable sedan door catching on the dirt bank,  
shearing cleanly from the frame.

I cried, stomping my cowboy boots in the snow.  
He said "Sorry to do this son,"  
and spanked me hard.

Soon after, he gave up farming  
and became a banker.  
On one page in our album he wears a sporty hat.  
On the next, a grey suit.

In a psych class in college,  
I recalled this as my first memory.  
That's how conscious life begins,  
the professor informed us.

## GOOD SOIL GONE TO WEEDS

1. Three years my wife and I  
churned compost out of slop.  
I kept rabbits;  
the droppings went onto the heap.  
The orange lop-  
eared buck rabbit  
we buried in a corner of the yard,  
victim of a lightning shock.

She insisted on nouveau French intensive --  
I wanted my childhood's farmer rows.  
So rows went one way,  
mounds the other,  
the garden effectively split in half.  
How hap-  
py I was her beets and carrots died.  
Our small boy chased rabbits around the stalks.

2. Dropping off a borrowed shovel  
I'd once charged at Sears,  
passing my old porch,  
noticing the newly painted red rails  
where a man in jaunty bermudas  
inquired my name and gave me restraining orders  
one of the first sunny days,  
I cross the carport  
and push the garden gate.

Unable to resist a peek, I see  
milkweeds standing six feet tall,  
morning glory looping like concertina wire,  
the ample pig's wort,  
waist high grasses  
fed as well as lettuce and zucchini,  
all free of human intervention.

William Stafford

A SOUND BY THE RIVER

A bird with a little brown vest  
called, "Killdeer, Killdeer," all day,  
and at evening flew away  
toward the west along the Cimarron.

It was something I never forgot  
after that, through a war, in cities  
and out, laughing, crying,  
trying to catch up with my life --

How a bird so small, soft feathers  
lost between earth and sky, buffeted,  
could utter its meaning so well,  
"Killdeer, Killdeer," pitying.

IN A LOW VOICE

Except for a pumpkin or something, I'd hardly  
go by size, as big people often do,  
standing tall, being great, looking down.

It might be better to crawl sometimes,  
and from down there judge what comes,  
like a dog, by wag or bite.

From away out on the end of a pier where I live,  
and the whole world getting dark, I launch  
my little matchbox boat and wait for the shudder of truth.

Waves embrace each other and ask,  
"Do you like me exactly the way I am?"  
and each one answers, "Of course, of course, of course."

Harold Johnson

### A MORNING OF OCTOGENARIANS

The doctor said, "First thing  
out of bed in the morning,  
throw a penny on the floor.  
If you can pick it up, okay.  
If you fall, go back to bed."  
That's what the doctor told him  
when he reached eighty-five.

Early today at Maude's house  
to spread a few shovels of barkdust,  
he can't rouse her with his knock.  
And finds her spilled  
on the kitchen floor among skirts,  
apron and shawl, thick specs  
still riding her nose, a piece of toast  
cartwheeled a foot from her hand.

The neighbor woman deciphers his shock,  
rings up the County. A van leads a curtain  
of dust down the gravel road to Maude's door.  
Carries her to the medical school  
where she's promised her corpse. He continues  
to rake. The barkdust darkens like old pennies.

### RETROSPECTIVE: POLLOCK IN LA

Blue Poles, a long painting, mute, manic, American,  
its tilted blue members looking strong as rebar  
in the chaos they dominate, halted me and legions  
of others open-mouthed, as if watching a dangerous  
and fantastic aerial performance. All afternoon  
I jostled back and forth between giant spattered  
canvases. Lacy layered violence in the black and green  
masterpiece once bartered for psychiatric help  
tore at my schoolish fears. I floated back to my aunt's house  
electrified, dreaming those brilliant splashes and drippings  
from the wounded alcoholic. But crashed against  
the drunken ghost of Uncle George, Aunt Martha's husband,  
a tense umber ferret who disappeared for years at a time,  
periodically spotted by cousins in St. Louis,  
Cleveland, Detroit, or Los Angeles.

I'd seen him once in person, years ago, looking  
depressed and blinky. Mother had a picture of him  
in uniform, standing at parade rest outside some tar-  
papered negro barracks. Now here he was, popped up in my face  
at Aunt Martha's house. She barely got out, "This is Harold,  
Lou's boy. He --" before he leapt into his monologue  
about the war: That he was alive because the general,  
a southerner, had liked the negro unit's cooking,  
and thus he hadn't had to cook under fire at the front  
after the hell of amphibious landing. But he hadn't escaped  
shock, or alcohol. He sat there rocking to the progress  
of whiskey and war through his heart. An ill wind --  
I fought to hang on to the lamppost of my painting dream.  
He slapped me on the kneecap -- "Do ya hear me, boy!" --  
with the back of his hand. War blazed before  
his bloodshot eyes, and his voice boiled into my ears.

He created the whistle of incoming mortars, uprooted orchards in torn black soil, innocent windfall apples scattered like flung beads of red and yellow paint under zinc-tasting smoke. Some boys from Alabama got wasted in a jeep with a colored captain, and a boy from Memphis who could play the saxophone...boxes with their names stacked in a corner of a chilly hangar. He showed how he used to prop his teeth open with his dogtags to test the notch because he was sure he was going to bite some o' that sombitchin' French dust -- "That's a long way from Yakima, aint it, boy," he yelled, backhanding my knee and fuming the air till my eyes watered. But that cracker general had liked his cooking and he'd lived. "You don't think that's *somethin'* ? He tried to shake his head into comprehension, shuddered, rocked, and cursed me -- "Nigger, you aint shit!" -- for not being a sport like Virgil, my twin brother, who armed him with a bottle whenever they met. Then he'd veer back to the war, staring bug-eyed into France, blue lips worming, grey hair frozen straight up like one sitting terrified piloting his gravebox.

Kathleen Culligan

A FAMILY DRAMA IN TWO ACTS  
WITH AN EPILOGUE

This is a story about a box.  
The box is a bedroom,  
and it's also a stage.  
The characters are the mother,  
the father, and the daughter.  
The daughter is a girl-woman  
in the first flush of youth,  
and all the cliches apply.

The parents are in place  
as the play begins,  
immobile on the mother's  
side of the bed. The box is dark.

Act One:

The daughter enters the box  
from the left, without knocking.  
Noticing the position of her parents  
as well as their breathless silence,  
she assumes her second attribute:  
now she is not only beautiful,  
but blind.

A moment later, borrowed hairbrush  
in hand, the daughter exits the box,  
averting her eyes as she walks  
past the bed, to avoid seeing  
what she cannot see. She blinks  
as she enters the hallway.

Act Two:

The beautiful, blinded daughter  
enters the box the next morning,  
hoping for illumination regarding  
the night before.

The mother continues to make  
the bed, the air clotted with  
questions that no one asks  
or answers.

Epilogue:

Years later the daughter  
fights her way out of the box,  
her father escapes by dying,  
and her mother is still  
making the bed.

Judith Barrington

HOW WE INVENT OUR PARENTS' LIVES  
(AND DEATHS)

The first boat tilts before it reaches water,  
one side released from the ropes too soon.  
It slaps down hard on the swell,  
casually tips out arms and legs and panicked bodies.

Does she watch the sickening descent?  
"Like a bucket in a well" she thinks,  
hating the insubstantial movement of water,  
always keeping her feet on the earth until now.

The next two are launched all right  
but half empty -- a few crew members  
pulling on the oars like madmen,  
a woman and a child huddled under one coat.

"Won't be enough room," I suppose he says to her,  
"they're not filling all the boats."  
He's been busy finding things out  
but she wishes he would stay still.  
Surely he could remember that wall  
with the red bougainvillea if he tried.  
Maybe even the three bent olive trees above Lloret.

Hidden above the ceiling of black smoke  
helicopters scrape the air and throb with unseemly passion.  
Newsmen stick cameras out and snap snap snap  
but no one on the ship sees them.  
The boats are all gone  
and time keeps on passing like a miracle.

"We can't stay much longer" he probably says  
as evil-smelling electrical smoke  
crams the cracks in the air, packs itself  
into noses, wafts slowly down into lungs.

People in lifejackets climb over the side.  
One by one they grab the ladder. Someone tells them  
there are ships out there beyond the smoke.  
Ships that will pick them up.

Perhaps it's then he says, "We'll have to go,"  
as sweat beads his face from the heat of the fire  
and she says yes or no  
or asks him what they should do  
when they step off the bottom rung.  
In one version she wonders if he remembers the children  
and whether she should ask  
as she leads the way to the rail.  
In another he curses as he drags her down.

Either way their watches both stop at exactly 6:18.

## BODY LANGUAGE

The thing that makes me crazy is  
how much I wanted her --  
the simple act of longing  
year after year, till finally  
she took my hand and held it  
pressed to her small right breast.  
That kind of longing  
turns your whole torso into a cavern  
where despair echoes wall to wall  
and hope leaps like a foetus.  
My complicity confuses the issue.  
How to say the word: *abuse*  
when my body tells another story --  
not a tale of clenched self-protection  
but an epic, my young arm  
reaching out for her breast,  
my back spreading wide to her touch?

The thing I go back to  
is the rain on the window --  
water washing all over the pane  
as hand moves to breast  
and someone seduces someone else.  
My complicity clouds the definitions  
like that misted window,  
one side of its thin old glass  
steaming with the heat of breath and skin  
while the other  
leans into the storm, weeping.

Christopher Howell

DREAM IN PROSE

We boarded a great swan-boat ferry  
for the north islands  
and sat very close, six of us  
wrapped in blankets, talk of books,  
your new child, the fresh face  
of things. You were with  
your former husband  
who had forgiven me, somewhat.  
But in this dream, mainly, it was you  
and I, again, in the warmth  
and when alone a moment, once,  
in the Chevy (for some reason)  
you looked at me the old way,  
to keep off the embrace  
I had to shake myself  
into the memory of having lost you  
and the terror almost woke me.  
But your husband's beautiful face  
gave me power  
and I went on sleeping,  
trying to keep you both.

The water was blue like a devil  
and the ship was larger  
than a single life  
with many blue lights traveling inside it.  
Sometimes we sighted land  
and almost made in. Sometimes our bodies  
were almost the single dazzling bird  
the sky climbs into on an Autumn day.  
Sometimes our island nearly rose  
within us, but the dream  
did not want it to.

Ralph Salisbury

AFTER DAD'S STORY

Bowed to still sheets, Dad's  
old friend, a name, only, till then,  
says if he's next he's ready,  
so old, he's ready.

We children, grown,  
a trinity of unbelievers, stare  
as two hundred pounds of air,  
compressed into ears, hurl,  
out of earth  
ahead of plow, stones  
heavy as those  
we'll each moulder to ounces under,

raised, maybe, then, from time to time,  
on someone's tongue, name name  
of no stranger.

Lee Crawley Kirk

FOR FREDA, GONE HOME

You had your cabin  
in the Sangre de Cristo mountains;  
a cooler place  
than Albuquerque summer.

Remembering this, I waited  
until fall to write you,  
the address on Virginia Street,  
your adobe hacienda;  
the warm house with big beams  
and you, old woman,  
fluttering daintily through it,  
a moth drawn to the memory  
of a husband decades dead.

My letter returned,  
a scribble on its face:  
"Died in the Sangre de Cristo."

Dead in the blood of Christ!  
The mountains have taken back  
that which was always theirs.  
I ask myself now,  
who haunts your wood-beamed house?

Chip Goodrich

SPRING GARDEN

The storm catches us  
transplanting broccoli,  
soaks us before  
we can scurry indoors.

We shiver out of our coats,  
unlace each other's boots.  
You poke up the fire.  
Wind shudders the cabin.  
The bedroom window  
is freckled with plum blossoms.

Tugging your wet clothes off,  
I kiss the new crow's-feet  
at your temples,  
the beginnings of callouses  
on your knees.



## FALL FLOWERS

Kapa harvests flowers in the backyard  
while I hang out laundry.  
Autumn's her favorite season,  
she's sunlit and radiant. With an armload  
of purple statice, gold mums, and red dahlias  
she dances patch to patch,  
babbling to the gods, shivering with passion.

In the cold shade of the house  
I pin up socks and shorts, feeling  
old, heavily domesticated. Love-stains  
on the sheets need bleaching, there are gutters  
to be hung, vows to be honored.

I shake out her slacks and blouses,  
pressing their wrinkles against my chest,  
watching her. Is that a glint  
of gray in her hair? When her face is weathered  
teapot copper, her crow's-feet folded  
with worldly secrets, I believe  
her walnut eyes  
will crackle and spark like campfires.  
Oil of lavender behind her ears,  
she'll make a formidable old lady.

Shelley Reece

## THE PUMP HANDLE

The rusty pump I froze my tongue to once  
is gone now. It was jealousy.  
The pump wanted all I could say.  
It drew me after dark  
to taste its ice and rust  
and remember its summer handle  
wagging with squeaks and clunks  
and the well's deep voice inside.  
I swallowed the burning ice  
and salty blood that took away  
my voice until an uncle  
seeing me bent over the handle  
poured water on my frozen tongue.

Scientists would say oxidation  
took the pump, but I know  
the fluid living down  
inside that cylinder rose  
to eat the pump silent.  
I looked down it once  
and saw my face, blue  
and flatter than a penny  
the year they were made of zinc.  
Only the concrete square remains,  
that and the scar on my tongue.

Barbara LaMorticella

### DELIBERATION

Thirteen years old, the boy  
carries a picture of Christ in his  
back pocket.

His father wants to brand him:

lunatic or criminal, it doesn't matter,  
something to certify his crime  
when he was born.

Exhaling smoke,  
the juvenile officer smiles.

"When was the last time you had a spanking,  
I mean a really good spanking?"

"You're polluting my air," the boy says,  
always smart.

The man leans back, rolls his eyes,  
blows a slow and deliberate smoke ring.

Floyd Skloot

### CAREERS

My brother, sprawled on the bed in shorts, thought  
the formula for success should stress one  
factor only. Across from him, I bought  
fame, farmed, walked on the moon and soaked up sun  
on cruises, having planned a balanced fate.  
He loved to grip his fortune in one hand,  
hustle around the board and celebrate  
each madcap trip to payday with a grand  
huzzah. He collected his salary,  
then swept through Big Business.

He would only  
play if I promised not to speak or be  
slow to roll the dice. He always beat me  
for the night, though I might win a game or  
two. Penny-a-point, and he kept the score.

Ingrid Wendt

MOTHER'S DAY, 1990

Next to me at the counter, a woman, a stranger  
compliments our waiter on his tie.  
Of course it could not go unnoticed: imperial  
crests of dubious lineage perched like red and black  
chickens too big for the roost: out of place among  
hashbrowns and toast as I was last night  
reading mother and daughter poems to college students  
in this high desert oasis where children are not  
where it's at and mothers are who you have to  
be seen with at breakfast during this annual visit.

So why my surprise when the waiter suddenly beams,  
becomes voluble; tells, although I can't hear, what is  
surely his favorite tie story before moving on to refill my tea  
and converse as though I were not old enough to be his own  
mother: I, who at eighteen thought twenty-one unapproachable;  
twenty-one, thought the faculty wife with toddlers already was  
over the hill, had sold out; who just this morning, being seated,  
has been looked through by just such another young woman,  
her eyes on a future vague as glamour surely lying beyond  
this tedium of courtesy, beyond this plain, blatant day.

And why am I suddenly grateful, as I found myself just  
last week in the store when a clerk I'd never met, exclaimed  
*What a beautiful jacket!* and I saw she was talking to me.  
And why, less than an hour ago, asking directions of the older-  
than-middle-aged filling station attendant, didn't I follow  
my impulse to ask where she got that peach-colored orchid on  
her lapel, so she could maybe have told me one of her children  
gave it to her; so she could have had someone to tell? Such

simple things, really: these moments of pleasure I keep on learning  
are yes, each day in our power to give each other, to help  
keep this inescapable human circle in repair, keeping  
each of us, as the lucky among us once were kept in the eyes  
of our own mothers, visible. Whole.

J. Paul Baron

DERWOOD ASH

On these Oregon nights  
there is the smell of musty men  
who live too long  
in cabins  
by rivers  
with forty cats and memories lost  
and teeth turning yellow.

I remember Derwood Ash  
who fed the deer  
out of his hand  
with apples and pieces of bread;

it was the only story he told  
when he came to town:  
all the others  
were washed away  
like rain washes leaves away  
after beating them colorless.

He was eighty-nine  
and lived in the smoke  
of old dreams. He called the deer  
by their first names.

I remember him now,  
tonight, one of the musty men  
out there in the dark,  
leaving their odors about.

Jane Glazer

BESIDE A DESERT RIVER

Here, in the shade of junipers,  
the desert full of smell and sound --  
sage and greasewood, sun-dried grass,  
the red-winged blackbird's call --  
you have come back whole to me,  
my first love, beside a river  
purling through tall reeds, where  
marsh wrens scold and rapids  
roil the muddy water, mirage  
created by sweltering weather.

You have come to this palpable air,  
this emptiness, chimerical as heat waves,  
to surprise me here, with students  
the same age we were when we marked  
our broad-jump records in the desert  
dust with a juniper bough,  
its berries acrid, reeking as cat pee.

We have kept our ears cocked  
all this musky afternoon, eyes  
peeled for rattlesnakes, tracks  
of coyotes, arrowheads in the sand.  
Across the Blitzen River, a prairie falcon  
poses in the rocks, stiff as taxidermy.  
Here, where desert brightness  
sears away pretenses, I miss  
your vibrant life. The clouds  
are changing patterns on the land.

Lisa M. Steinman

## GROUND CONTROL

The world moves without  
our descriptions.  
Or so they say.  
Tongues flap and never  
get off the ground.

When I fought the water company,  
I was articulate; privileged, I knew  
the language bureaucrats salute,  
and ran it up their  
flagpole. Things moved

fast enough then  
though the water went off  
next door. Fluent in some language  
we say we *have* English; we do  
or don't *have* Spanish.

Though I resolve to pocket nothing  
this time around, I find I have:  
ticket stubs, old kleenex,  
the loud irritating voice  
of a neighbor who sells houses.

And I remember a childhood walk  
to a lake. In a tarpaper shack  
on the way, the three bears lived.  
My father said so and so  
I believe, treading carefully

although the posted signs  
on the door were from a public  
utility. The bears had their uses too --  
I never approached the lake alone.  
It seems our stories take flight:

I argue with the company  
and the bears lose everything,  
to say nothing of my neighbors -- real  
estate or other. Their lives seep into mine  
like fluid speech seeking its own level.

Celia Piehl

TOBI

Perhaps I collect paintings  
because of her. She brushed  
colors direct from tubes  
into abstracts bright enough  
to stand out against turquoise  
walls and orange woodwork.

What a kick to greet her downtown  
in her custom yellow roadster,  
red leather coat and hat,  
a cigarette hanging  
from a lipstick-bleeding mouth.

She had youth appeal,  
this happy hedonist,  
middle-aged wife of a professor  
who applauded her eccentricities.  
I adored her as only a young mother  
smelling of milk can an older woman  
playing life to the brim.

After my letter was returned unopened  
I saw her paintings once more,  
not well. The shades were drawn.  
The boys were grown before we bought  
our first paintings. None is  
as startling as Tobi's were.

Nancy Dahlberg

MAGNET SCHOOL

I may be getting all A's in school,  
Mom, but I feel like my body's not.  
I want to take this dance class that meets  
tonight. Drive me there, Mom? Please?

Modern Jazz for Teens and Young Adults  
requiring three weeks ballet  
for those who don't know the positions,  
how to move, or what to do

with the hands -- like my son. A mother  
only wants to help so we went in,  
I paid the fee and watched the thirtyish dance  
instructor eyeing him,

her hair tight back, her leggy body  
smoothed into black wet-look tights,  
while I swelled into my support hose  
and stacked-heel Naturalizers.

Then she walked -- no, stalked -- up to Steven  
giving off some dusky scent  
as she moved right past me to confront  
my boy. He straightened up

to his whole proud height while that woman  
ran the whole back of her spread-  
open hand down the whole front of his  
long adolescent torso --

my God, she took her time about it --  
then smiled up to him with oh  
you've got a wonderful body,  
while he smiled back. He smiled back!

Lois Bunse

MY BLACK HEN

This chicken, mighty, really, stands  
still, one leg bent, her claw trailing. In lovely  
hesitation, she's taking the weight off,  
taking measure of just exactly how long  
will my hugeness be looking back at her?  
Then and again, just like the black horse  
across the road, she has the knack  
of standing dark in front of a blaze,  
a field wild with oats.

I've tried the study of yin and yang;  
the clang of abstraction: This and That.  
I, myself, take statement right on the chin,  
return with another, my knees and knuckles bent.  
But to look up and happen to encounter  
my chicken distinguishing herself  
right in my own field of vision?

Shadow saddles her back, exact,  
not a feather out of line.  
The whole bird embodies clarity,  
the difference between light and dark.  
She stands with integrity, edges intact.

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David Johnson

### VAUDEVILLE IN THE GARDEN

Eight stellar jays  
In a tree of white blossoms  
Who are we? Who are we?  
they mime  
Bobbing all juicy and fat.

Answer: Plums



REVIEW: Imaginary Ancestors by Madeline DeFrees (Broken Moon Press, Seattle, 1990)

This is an intriguing and wonderful book. As the most fully realized yet of Madeline DeFrees's explorations of personal mythology, it makes the reader realize that there is no final state, no final answer, in the process of becoming. In a society in which we continually imagine and pursue "goals and objectives," it is a pleasure to enter into Madeline DeFrees's freeform yet logical construction of a life. Parts of Imaginary Ancestors have appeared in two earlier incarnations, first as a chapbook with the same title and later in the collection, Maggie on the Gallows (Copper Canyon Press, 1982). I will not point out obvious connections between the poet's life and poetry except to say that Madeline DeFrees's years as a nun and her release from her religious vows in 1975 when she was in her fifties is a well-known and inescapable element in our reading of her work. Given her background and the shifts of identity she has undergone, her search for "ancestors" is all the more poignant and amusing. With this reappearance of earlier poems in a new context the poem is no longer an object fixed in time but takes on qualities of hyper-text, the manifestation of multi-dimensional consciousness.

Central to the mythology is having an orphan for a mother, a mother who imagines (or really knows the truth of?) connections to illustrious if lost relations, in particular to Ulysses S. Grant, via "Grandmother Grant" about whom the poet wonders: "If he knocked her down / in the stinking hold of a ship and raped her, / if she followed him out of the church / into the oldest garden under moonstone limbs." A trip to the "New York Foundling / home" leads only to "A Closed File." So the poet, who says, "I need to come into my own," decides, if Grant, then why not a host of others? Why not Maria Callas and Greta Garbo to accentuate an operatic and mysterious tendency in the family? Emily Dickinson and Gerard Manley Hopkins provide material for a speculation on the poet's true ancestry--surely these are her natural parents. She imagines "they took a formal cruise," and "they traveled fifteen knots the day her White / Election fell to his Ignation news."

As DeFrees continues to add to the Imaginary Ancestors collection, her organizing principle of inclusion by influence, both logical and highly imaginative, grows to include "Marianne Moore" whose famous tricorne hat leads DeFrees to reflect on the hat-buying sessions of her Catholic childhood: "Little wonder Sundays / were one continuous headache. Did I become / addicted to pain, put on the linen / bandeau and coif, the name a martyr's crown / stiffened to perfection that came off / only in secret?" In another poem, "the brass-bordered / crucifix like the ring on my hand" which weights her down relates her to "The Giraffe Women of Burma" whose copper neck coils stretch and atrophy the women's necks.

Suffice it to say, DeFrees's relationships are sometimes startling and farflung, but what makes them work, besides the inherent interest of the

stories she spins and the beauty of the language in which she does so, is that she sees in others not the alienation of strangeness but some facet of herself.

In "Eminent Victorians" she asks, "What matter / that the world is evil if our words contain it?" Her life and work become a process of embracing dualities, admitting the whole self. Imagining the "Honey Hunters of Nepal" and the dangers of other lives she says she "must create a legend to equal the story of Ambrose: a swarm from the brood comb / settled on my mouth as I lay in my cradle, the omen / propitious. It was raining honey. / Here lies the honey-tongued Hillsboro poet! What if / the bees make me suffer at times." Such is the life of poetry.

Madeline DeFrees was born in eastern Oregon and grew up in Hillsboro. After years of teaching in various locales including Oregon, Massachusetts, Montana, and Washington, she retired to the Northwest where she continues to write and to teach in various workshops. As evidenced in this collection, her poetry continues to grow in vitality and skill, testimony to the reality of the imagined life.

B. D.

AFTERWORD by Barbara Drake, Guest Editor

In guest-editing this issue of Fireweed, I looked for some unifying element for my choices. I wanted to choose poems that would somehow reflect on one another and reinforce the community of poetry but I wasn't sure whether that would appear as a recurrent theme, technique, or what. I approached the stack of poems with open interest. I soon noticed that I gravitated toward the ones with an element of story and thus began to use that inclination to shape the collection. Story-telling in a poem is not the same as story-telling in prose, though the genres share something in the way they use language to recreate the world. I think poetry is more trans-genre these days. We're more apt to tolerate prose-like poetry than poetic prose. But these poems are not particularly prose-like; instead, it is the storytelling elements that unify. Chronology, setting, character-in-conflict, and so on.

Some of these poems such as Jim Shugrue's "The Morning Talks" or Barbara La Morticella's "Deliberation" present a slice of life, that attractive delicatessen approach. Others seem to have their origins in nostalgia but in fact retell some story from the past in order to understand the present, getting it clear both in the sense of coming to terms with some persistent memory or impulse and simply trying to figure out what happened. I would put Judith Barrington's haunting poems, Ron Johnson's bittersweet marriage stories, Joan Dobbie's poem about a father's death, and Ingrid

Wendt's becoming-your-mother meditation in that category. Nancy Dahlberg's amusing and slightly uncomfortable "Magnet School" records a mother's reaction to a dance teacher admiring her son's body. In each of these the poet says: something happened--what was it exactly? And though the answer is never cut-and-dried, we move through the ambiguities of poetry (remember, there are at least seven) to some apprehension of experience difficult to arrive at otherwise.

Other poems here use conventions of prose fiction as part of the symbolic language of the poem. Stafford's waves carry on a brief dialogue: "'Do you like me exactly the way I am?' / And each one answers, 'Of course, of course, of course.'" Stafford's "A Sound by the River" speaks in a dramatic narrative voice: "It was something I never forgot / after that, through a war in cities / and out, laughing, crying, / trying to catch up with my life--" and suggests a twentieth century frame of mind evoked by a variety of modern writers of fiction from Hemingway to Carver. Other poems use a folkloric approach, telling tales of a region, of a life, of a past. J. Paul Baron's "Derwood Ash" reflects on an Oregon character: "I remember him now, / tonight, one of the musty men / out there in the dark, / leaving their odors about." Vince Wixon's "Coyotes", like Chip Goodrich's two poems, uses landscape and an event to suggest understated but intense human commitment. More than one of these poems has a how-I-came-to-be element. Celia Piehl's "Tobi" pays homage to an admired older woman artist and in only twenty-four lines creates a life, perhaps a death, and transcendence, as does Lee Crawley Kirk's "For Freda, Gone Home." Lisa Steinman's "Ground Control" remembers a childhood walk with her father, himself a storyteller, and puts it in relation to "When I fought the water company, / I was articulate." Harold Johnson's poems incorporate stories of "Uncle George, Aunt Martha's husband, / a tense umber ferret who disappeared for years at a time," and the death of the aged: "A van leads a curtain / of dust down the gravel road to Maude's door." Other poems employ stories in various ways, Floyd Skloot's look at the differences in brothers, Kathleen Culligan's depiction of family taboos and tensions, Jane Glazer's moody evocation of "my first love" in a desert visitation, and Lois Bunse's meditations on chicken attitudes. Chris Howell's "Dream in Prose" invites comparison to fiction by its title, as does Ralph Salisbury's "After Dad's Story." Finally, in David Johnson's poem about bluejays playing at charades, there are no human characters at all, but in this ideogram of a drama I find appropriate punctuation to this collection of tales told and hinted at in poetry.

## EDITORS' NOTES

**WORKERS OF THE WORLD!!** A final call for work-related poems for Clem Starck's selection of poems, part of July's issue. Send by June 1 to Fireweed. "Attention, Clem."

**GUEST EDITOR:** Barbara Drake, Yamhill, edited almost all of this Fireweed. She selected from fifty poets' work, wrote an overview of the collection and a book review. We feel this is a distinctive issue. Barbara is English Department Chair at Linfield College. Her poetry has been published in three books, the latest is from Breitenbush: What We Say to Strangers. She has read, judged contests, and led workshops throughout the state.

The day we visited her Yamhill farm we drank some of her husband's vintage, watched a ewe about to deliver a lamb, and felt the whole coastal weather regime streaming overhead in one of those brilliantly light and dark early spring days.

**FIREWEED EATERS:** Our July issue will announce the time and location of our 2nd Annual Fall Potluck and Open Reading.

## CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

**J. PAUL BARON**, Coos Bay, exhibited paintings last fall at the Hult Center. For 26 years he was a South coast journalist.

**JUDITH BARRINGTON**, Portland, wrote the libretto for an oratorio, Mother of Us All, music by David York. Her two poetry collections are from The Eighth Mountain Press. She founded The Flight of the Mind, an annual writing workshop for women.

**LOIS BUNSE**, Gleneden Beach, has been poet-in-the-schools and lived and taught, respectively, in Salem and Jefferson.

**KATHLEEN CULLIGAN**, Portland, directs the Oregon Writer's Workshop and teaches writing at the University of Portland.

NANCY DAHLBERG, Eugene, recently moved to Eugene from Houston where she finished a poetry writing degree. She read in Corvallis this winter, and her poetry has been published by Shenandoah.

JOAN DOBBIE, Eugene, again, returns from New York State, resuming yoga and poetry teaching.

JANE GLAZER, Portland, teaches at Marylhurst and Catlin Gable School. She won a 1990 Washington State Poetry Prize. Her poems are in Calyx, Calapooya Collage, Hubbub, and others.

CHIP GOODRICH, Corvallis, has a poem in the Exxon Valdez anthology from Breitenbush, Season of Dead Water. He will marry the muse of these poems in May.

CHRISTOPHER HOWELL, Emporia, Kansas, teaches at Emporia State University and spends summers in the Northwest. His fifth poetry book comes this May from True Directions, San Francisco.

DAVID JOHNSON, Eugene, is an editor of Big Rain, a literary journal out soon. He writes features for What's Happening. He read poetry and fiction in Eugene this winter.

HAROLD JOHNSON, Portland, wrote a chapbook Dry Boats. He is an artist, too, and teaches in Portland Night High School.

RON NETHERTON JOHNSON, Portland, studied religions and psychology in Santa Cruz and creative writing in Eugene.

LEE CRAWLEY KIRK, Eugene, has poetry in last year's Calapooya Collage. She is a contributing columnist and editor for Righting Words.

BARBARA LA MORTICELLA, Portland, hosts poets on KBOO. Her 1988 chapbook Even The Hills Move in Waves comes from Leaping Mountain Press. Mr. Cogito, Sing Heavenly Muse, The Oregonian, Calapooya Collage have published her work.

CELIA PIEHL, Bandon, retired from private counseling in Coos County. She has poetry in KSOR Guide, The Archer, Blue Unicorn.

SHELLEY REECE, Portland, teaches English at Portland State. His poems have appeared in Oregon English and Calapooya Collage.

RALPH SALISBURY, Eugene, has a book of short stories, One Indian and Two Chiefs, to be published this year, and a novel in progress. He is recently retired from teaching in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Oregon. He has published five volumes of poetry.

JIM SHUGRUE, Portland, is co-editor of Hubbub. He works for a Portland bookstore.

FLOYD SKLOOT, Portland, has poetry in the new Northwest Review and chapbooks from Silverfish Review. Storyline Press publishes his first novel in 1992.

WILLIAM STAFFORD, Lake Oswego, is to be honored this May by two volumes from Adrienne Lee Press, Monmouth: a volume of new and uncollected poems and a volume of poems about William Stafford and his work.

LISA M. STEINMAN, Portland, teaches at Reed and co-edits Hubbub. Arrowood Books of Corvallis published her collection of poems: All That Comes to Light.

INGRID WENDT, Eugene, is editing with Primus St. John the poetry volume of the OCTE-OSU collection of Oregon literature. Her prize winning collection is Singing the Mozart Requiem. New poems are forthcoming in Wilderness and The Massachusetts Review.

VINCE WIXON, Ashland, co-producer of the documentary video of William Stafford, is working on the sequel, William Stafford -- Over the Mountains.