

FIREWEED

Poetry of Western Oregon



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Guest Editor: Clem Starck

Editors: Erik Muller, Ann Staley, David Laing

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Ben Jonson was a bricklayer. John Keats was at one time a surgeon's apprentice. Wallace Stevens was an insurance executive. Or so it is said. You'd certainly never know any of this from reading their poems. In fact, from reading poems you'd hardly know what any English-language poet did for a living.

This is a curious fact, inasmuch as for most of us making a living occupies a considerable portion of our waking life. So what *did* all those poets do? Did they live on royal patronage? Did they live on air? (Maybe this accounts for the popular notion of poets as ethereal or airy-fairy!) Whatever they did, they didn't choose to tell us. How they kept body and soul together they apparently considered unimportant.

Poetry was a lofty endeavor. It strove for the celestial and shunned the mundane. It was an attempt to outline the shape of the soul or to record the yearning of the heart-- not the anatomical heart, a pump located in the rib cage, but the heart as a metaphor, the seat of what are called 'the emotions'. However, our language also admits other possibilities. It is just as possible to write about the flexing of muscle and the articulation of bone as it is to describe the throb of a metaphorical heart.

Besides, the air is polluted now. We can't live on it, at least not in the same way as before. We poets have to work for a living. To put bread on the table. To make ends meet. To keep the wolf from the door. These are more desperate times perhaps, and the job of keeping body and soul together is not so unimportant. In fact, it could even serve as the subject for a poem!

'Working for a living.' The phrase has an awkwardness to it. Is it a pleonasm? What else could you do for a living? Even breathing is a form of labor. And the word itself: *work*. A good four-letter word. From the Anglo-Saxon *worc*, *werc*, *weorc*. 'Exertion of strength or faculties to accomplish something; toil; labor; also, employment; occupation; as, to be out of *work*.' So the dictionary tells us.

What follows is a collection of poems on the subject of work, on the experience of work, told by those who have experienced it firsthand. These are insider poems-- not poems *about* leech-gatherers and chimney-sweeps, but poems *by* leech-gatherers and chimney sweeps.

I find it an interesting bunch of poems. All of them are very mundane. None of them is airy-fairy.

Clem Starck, Guest Editor

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Robert Peterson's "Report from the Photo Service" is from his chapbook *The Binnacle* (Lillabulero Press, 1967). Carlos Reyes' poem "Moon Mullins" is from *Nightmarks* (Lynx House Press, 1990). Robert McDowell's "Working a #30 Sash Tool . . ." is from *Quiet Money* (Henry Holt and Company, 1987). Elizabeth Campbell's "Nude Cleaning a Bathtub" originally appeared in *Clockwatch Review*.

Vern Rutsala's "The Furniture Factory" is from *Walking Home from the Icehouse* (Carnegie-Mellon University Press, 1981); it also appeared in his *Selected Poems* just published this year by Story Line Press. Rutsala's poem "The Moment's Equation" was published previously in *Sycamore Review*.

Tom Crawford's "Things I Learned about Carpentry. . ." is from his collection *If It Weren't for Trees* (Lynx House Press, 1987). Barbara Drake's "The Teaching of Composition" is from *What We Say to Strangers* (Breitenbush Books, 1986). Gary Lark's "V.A. Hospital, 1966" was first published in the magazine *Samisdat*.

Barbara Baldwin's poem "Eight to Five" is reprinted from *Helicon Nine*. Hannah Wilson's "At the Hoffman Television Factory, 1953" also appeared recently in *The Minneapolis Review of Baseball*.

Henry Carlile's "Butchering Crabs" is from *Running Lights* (Dragon Gate, Inc., 1981). Carlile's "Graveyard Shift" appeared previously in *Shenandoah*. Erik Muller's "Cafe" appeared previously in *Dog River Review*. And J.B. Hall's "Hand Tools" is from *Bereavements: Collected and Selected Poems*, to be published this fall by Story Line Press; it originally appeared in *kayak*.

George H. S. Singer

A WORK LESSON

In Sojiji Temple the monks clear the ground thus:
First, all of them know there is no end to leaves;
they whirl and settle endlessly like thoughts,
return anew like passion after each clean sweep.
Second, the monks make a circle with their rakes and brooms
like beaters driving a tiger into nets.
Each starts at the edge of the garden
and clears inward to the common pile.
Third, all bow to the discarded clothes of summer's groves
and to each other,
brothers in karma's hard sweeping.
Fourth, the oldest monk kindles the little pyre
of crimson sheddings.
Smoke curls like incense round calloused hands
and all begin again.
One day, when I am weary of the broken children
in the group home and my own hunger
to be known,
my master says to me:
"It was the sweeping of the paths in Sojiji
that taught me how to work."

Martha Gatchell

FINGERNAILS

Oh, those lovely long oval ornaments
some women wear! I couldn't even buy them
in a store. Two minutes in the greenhouse,
and presto!-- ten little shovels
full of compost, shedding pink enamel flakes
into the potting mix.

Mine are trapezoids: blunt slants
across my fingers' ends, tough ridges
of callus cushioning the corners. Sometimes
gnawed, always ragged, split from prying
at edges, poking, scraping, picking things up.

Amazing, the things they accumulate: coffee grounds,
dandruff, salt, the odd juices of everything
they touch. Like magnets, they attract
infinitesimal bits of all the surfaces they work:
pollen, ink, flour, earth, blood, the occasional sliver.

I clean them with a pocket knife, prying the day out
bit by bit, reading it over. I wear them
down, use them for everything. They keep growing,
bless them; they put themselves out for me,
give me a grip on the world.

Pinched, they blush; hammered, they blacken.
Little white moons record every assault,
and I count them by the old custom: friends,
foes, letters, woes, journeys-to-go. They keep
bits of it all, remind me as I scrape them yet again
how busy they've been.

Pliable shelters, renewable tools. I scrub them clean
for the kitchen, nip off rough edges for town,
slather on hand cream, enjoy their smooth silk slide
over warm skin. I tell them they can grow long later,
later, when I lay them down.

Charles Goodrich

BENTON COUNTY CORRECTIONS WORK CREW

We are all misdemeanants and minor felons.
We are drunk drivers, wife beaters, coin-box riflers,
brawlers, drug users and embezzlers.
We have forged our father's checks.
We have failed to pay child support.
We have a long history of parking tickets
and we talked back to the judge.

And now suddenly, for a court-ordered number of weekends,
we are transformed into ditch diggers,
garbage men, parking-lot sweepers. We meet
Saturday mornings--8:00 sharp--at the County Shops
and drive to the job site in the Sheriff's van
bitching about the fat boys at City Hall,
the child molesters in high places,
the well-paid developers of lethal substances.

And still bitching, we pass out the brooms,
we pass out the hoes, we pass out the shovels.
And we sweep off the parking lot, still bitching,
and we hoe the weeds, and we dig out the ditches,
working our anger with heads lowered,
working like sons-of-bitches, like bricklayers
and carpenters' helpers, like judges and lawyers,
like emergency-room nurses and factory workers,
like teachers and politicians and short-order cooks.

Like criminals. We are all criminals, God bless us.
And we are not willing to admit we fucked up.

THE CORRECTIONS WORK CREW DIGS POST-HOLES FOR A NEW FENCE AROUND HYAK PARK

In two-man teams we've been taking turns
jabbing the post-hole diggers into the ground.
One digs, the other rests,
then we switch.
Seventy-five holes in the hard clay
and it's not even lunch.

Then a car stops.
He says, "What're you doing?"
He takes us for government workers
standing around on his tax dollars.

"We're installing holes," Daryl informs him.
But the car roars off without listening.
"We're criminals!" Kelly yells after him,
"We aren't even getting paid!"
We laugh and go back to work.

But the spirit's gone. The rest of the day
we hold back
like we were on wages.

Ron Netherton Johnson

IN WASHOUGAL UNDER DEPRESSED CONDITIONS

I worked part-time, airpainting at a factory
that made lawn and garden statuary.
My golden Buddha with black sash and red pedestal
guarded the gate of the Home and Garden
Improvement Center at the Vancouver Fred Meyer,
waiting for an unusual buyer of good taste.

My job depended on production.
I carefully painted hollow trees and stumps
elves sat on, with blue and white flowers,
elves with blue eyes and shaded faces--
I didn't calculate the hours,
my goal was to make them live.

Late at night I placed them in single file:
turtles with multi-colored Indian shells,
wearing bonnets or hats;
Mr. Frogs with tuxedos, white shirts and spats;
dwarves with clothes like the wood or sun,
their shoes of shining black;
birdbaths with lifelike bluebirds and sparrows.

Off work, I cruised in my grey Corvair,
stalking a 13-year-old girl
I met at the Conservative Baptist Church,
where I had applied for aid.
Her folks invited me to dinner.

Then I was arrested for out-of-state plates.
My court date before the Camas magistrate
was a flop. The gnarly judge became provoked
when I complained about the fine.
The clerk tried to warn me, but too late.
He slammed me in jail. I called my employer,
interrupting football on TV,
stood motionless in the center of a 10-foot cell
for two hours, till he showed with \$50 bail.

Vern Rutsala

THE FURNITURE FACTORY

Upstairs the sanders
rubbed fingernails
thin, hands shiny
and soft as a barber's--
men past forty
down on their luck.
Below, I worked in a haze
of fine dust
sifting down--
the lives of the sanders
sifting down, delicately
riding the cluttered
beams of light.
I pounded nails
on the line.
The wood swallowed hard
nailheads like coins
too thin to pick up.
During breaks I read--
You gonna be
a lawyer, Ace?--
then forgot the alphabet
as I hammered
afternoons flat.
My father worked there too
breathing the sanding
room's haze.
We ate quiet lunches together
in the car.
In July
he quit-- hands
soft, thick fingernails
feathery at the tips.

Vern Rutsala

THE MOMENT'S EQUATION

The damp circles their bottles print
link arms across the table, circle
after faint circle, mysterious as magicians'
silver rings. But nothing pulls these rings

apart. They keep their own intimate
score, some written record of the hour
after work, the dusty revelations
of exhaustion cut by beer, resentment

and release fluttering like flies
with wet wings trying to fly. It's
the usual script of getting even with
the boss-- my father sitting there, his

stories all "He says" and "I says,"
finally coming out on top of that yahoo
foreman. The others nod and drink.
But there is some cross-grained meaning

I reach for in the linked rings and the pattern
of cigarette butts in the ashtray.
It's a meaning like the wavy sweat stains
on hat bands and the worn spots on work pants,

it's in what is truly said by the burnished
silver corners of black lunch pails. Something
rubs and speaks there the way it speaks
in those hammer handles rubbed smooth

as glass and the business ends of shovels
brilliant as polished chrome.
These meanings stir below alibi and excuse,
written in codes lost below layers

of macadam spread steaming in summer heat,
pounded senseless again and again
by truck tires. My father tells his
stories, forcing words to win back

what was lost. His friends nod, squint,
and tell their stories too, slowly now
in this soothing gloom, air dark as ale.
They get even the only way they can,

linking their rings' zeros in this casual
parliament that endorses their days
and notarizes the moment's equation
with each round formally bought in turn,

smoke and beer-buzz thickening until every
boss who ever lived finally owns up that he's
a candyass sonofabitch and, finally redeemed, they
may now steer their own dark macadam home.

Tom Crawford

THINGS I LEARNED ABOUT
CARPENTRY AND COULDN'T WAIT
TO TELL

It's not the shellacking that gets me
though there's something heavenly there
but the opening of the wood now
that I won't even let my wife see
and the thing coming together again
keeps the fingers so busy there's no time to think
about the cold garage
only the smell of it
and the brass screws going in under me
butting up the joints
where I stall
at every turn now,
Jesus!
he would have understood this and the joys
of counter-sinking
and the putting in of plugs

James B. Hall

HAND TOOLS

Inside this square metal box
Not even a small fire burns
To warm my faithful tools

Auger, Jackplane, Nailset, Bevel;

Numb, with more patience than wood,
Gouged by inexperience-- and show it
Extensions only of my own hands and errors

Drawknife, Hammer, Handsaw, Adz.

All through the night their dreams
Are dreams only of tools
Among clouds, forever making other tools

Rasp, Tee Square, Chalkline, Awl;

Yet sunup to them is only the lid lifted
Of one more workday, mostly out of plumb,
And me--sullen--and at least half thumbs

Plumbbob, Miter, Spokeshave, Level.

Yet beyond the confession of all windows
We whistle the dry curl of cedar shavings
Or caulk the tremors of this, our house:

*Auger, Jackplane, Nailset, Bevel;
Drawknife, Hammer, Handsaw, Adz.
Rasp, Tee Square, Chalkline, Awl;
Plumbbob, Miter, Spokeshave, Level.*

Barbara Drake

THE TEACHING OF COMPOSITION

Sitting here
all this October day,
grading composition papers,
I remember
one of my children's grade school teachers
who said that the purpose of education
was to achieve inner peace.
She was a wholesome woman
who fixed her lunches ahead of time
on the weekends,
nifty casseroles.
She would freeze them
in individual ovenproof glassware containers
to heat up later in the school oven.
Imagine,
planning five little casseroles for yourself
a week ahead of time.
What inner peace
might arise from such kindness
to one's self.
How can I convey this wisdom
to my own students,
college freshman
who arrive each fall
with their modifiers dangling
like cans on a dog's tail.
It is a rare college freshman
who seems to know the meaning
of inner peace.
I offer them the peaceful
blank page,

the release of words,
but they fail to be specific,
worry about grades, roommates, and social life,
and continue to shift tenses
as if a sentence were a Pontiac.

Students, compose yourselves.
The goal of education
is to achieve inner peace.
Don't worry,
but think of the quietude
afforded by a perfectly constructed sentence,
the calming logic of tenses
coming one after another
like a series of tasty casseroles
waiting to be thawed and heated,
one for each day of the week.

THE INFLUENCE

My brother, a geologist, says,
"When I was four and you were nine, you told me
that the universe was composed entirely
of earth, air, fire, and water."

"So," I say,
"you have me to thank
for where you are today."

August Baunach

ALIEN CORN

Ruth the cake decorator
never complained about
the cheap air brush,
carcinogenic dyes,
stagnant air,
lack of light
or of respect.

Day in, day out, at five a.m.
she'd drive twenty miles
from the farm to work,
lace her apron,
lace her cakes
with beautiful
'edible' colors--
blue grease, white sugar, red dye.

At her side was Jesus.
They talked eight hours a day.
She asked me to speak with him.
I was polite but not interested.
"Yes," I said, "Taoists believe
in everything."

One baker who'd defected,
jumped to our competitor's ship
with treasonous high guilt,
came often back to Ruth
for exorcism--
the legion demons
in his wake
hung around the loading dock.
Sometimes I'd go out and
have a cigarette with them.

FULL HOUSE BY EIGHT A.M.

The oven lends drama
to the croissants, muffins and tarts
which we choreograph in the case,
an edible Punch & Judy show.

Our audience strolls by
to view the spectacle:
those blessed with natural largesse,
the affected gourmets,
sugar addicts in a state of grace,
travelers bearing loaves away.

An aroma of butter,
cinnamon, honey and raisins,
fruit and nuts browned to a turn,
floats over the cool sidewalk
like salt air over a Venetian plaza,
like soy sauce in Kyoto markets
-- a bit of bistro in every demitasse.

Robert Peterson

REPORT FROM THE PHOTO SERVICE

The war goes on.
Frank De Luca the Delivery Commander
& I a Driver
one of his Men
& all the Men are Maneuvering.

Our Casualties,
Fernando the Peruvian fallen asleep
in Pacifica. And Missing Maneuvering. And
Reece's Reno wife run off
with a Welder

& all his Sportcoats & he Quit.
Larry busted
for Loss of Temper
to the Commander, Fernini
into Civil Service

@ \$2.26 an hour.
What's left of the Legion?
Utility Montgomery & Brannan the Marine
& Careless Harris
& Tom the Groom we are the Veterans

Shifting gears
of the Company Trucks
& sniffing muriatic Acid.
We have seen the Drone Girls
& don't Do Them, we tell Frank De Luca

Where to go
with his Accident Reports
& are forgiven, borrow his
Money
& ride into the City

With memorized Pictures
to meet the Enemy. We meditate
around our Machines
the Commander's Past & Future: 23 yrs.
driving for Belfast Bottling Co.

Not opening Map or Book
now seeing Doctors at 58 & making
too many bum bets. But we
are Frank's Men he wants to push On
against Logic

Shooting Wondercolor developments
to the whole USA
15¢ raise in December
if we follow Instructions

Carlos Reyes

MOON MULLINS

The first time I met him
we were headed out of Newport
for the Columbia bar.
He came up the doghouse
took out the chart
ruler and a number four pencil
drew a heavy line roughly North
and said this is the way we'll go boys
and disappeared below.

I believe he once said
when I was with him
that the surface of the sea
was rolling hills green and sometimes
blue where goats or maybe he said boats
gamboled and frolicked
sometimes in the bright sunshine
sometimes hiding behind waves in the fog.

And I think I once heard him call
the seaweed that collected on the lines
goatsbeard or maybe he was just mumbling
or maybe it was a bit untranslated
from his native language
whatever that was. Well

the thing I'm certain he said
the one thing he was right about
was that the ocean has a face
angry or smiling and you can read it
but you'd better read it right.

Richard Dankleff

NEW DAY

Scatter of clouds, tail end of a squall--
we're dry inside the wheelhouse. Ahead
blown foam tumbled like bed sheets
decorates our foredeck. Sunlight spills
over davits and rails. Other shining wonders.
O the greasy winches are rinsed and I
may float overhead with the sun
if I let go my grip on the wheel.

From the radio room, a reassuring
clatter of keys, Sparks' typewriter bell.
Below, pans clank in the galley--
the cooks are coughing and laughing.
That bakery smell may be breakfast rolls.

In twenty minutes my wheel watch ends.
I'll take three fried straight up. And a bowl
of raisin-studded oatmeal. It's good
to have these biceps and this belly.

A day and a night till port. From the bay
we'll see brown roofs, pink roofs, white walls.
Closer, we'll scent that harbor blend--
tug smoke, mud, frangipani. We'll dock
a five-minute walk from the hill. Danielle
or Carlota. Hold on. Hold on.

Richard Dankleff

LONG AFTERNOON IN LEVUKA

The longshoremen keep moving, Fiji style.
On the dock they lug copra, shed to ship,
two men to a bag, and pile the bags on slings.
The winch hoists each slingful up to our hatch,
where more Fijians cut twine and empty the bags
into our number 3 hold. (Down there's where we
take over. The mate has sent us down--
between clean jobs--all sweltering day
to rake the copra level.)

Finally, coffee break.

"They should load bags and all"--Caffeine.
"Bags cost," John says. We're in the crew mess now.
"They'll take a month to load"--Caffeine.
"Ten days," John says, "in a pretty port."
"Copra bugs in my bunk"--Caffeine.
"Not many though," John says.
"This cargo stinks." "Not bad. If the stuff
was guano . . . Listen--"

John shipped out once

on a tramp ancestor of our Liberian Greeks.
Hard years. No fat. To pay the bills
they anchored by guano rocks, a seabird roost
off the coast of Peru. Convicts barged the guano
out to the tramp, in bags. John winched them up.
More convicts cut and dumped--clouds of rotten dust--
and shook out every bag to save. The deck gang--
red-eyed, masked in torn-up towels--would climb
into the hold to level off. It stank down there
like a hundred chicken coops uncleaned all winter.
Say God and the Devil put their heads together
to create those loose-boweled cormorants and gulls,
then fed them Humboldt Current herring,
and stood clear. What piled up was cargo.
You couldn't escape--

Break's over.

We're back down in the hold.
"Sort of sickening fumes"--Caffeine.
"Sort of sweet," John says. We rake.
"This coconut crap ends up ice cream"--Caffeine.
"Soap," John says. We rake. Through the hatch
the sun is lower, a little, maybe.

CHIPPING DECKS

Hack by hack we flake off layers of rust
while the ship bakes in the sun
and waits to dock. Maybe today
we'll get this maindeck chipped *and*
scraped *and* red-lead painted. Behind
the eyes, that chipping-hammer ache.
The mate, not one to waste a working day,
has got us all on eight-to-five. That's how
this migraine-mothering game is played.
Nine angry hammers clank and rake rust--
nine handles so far won't break. Behind
the eyes, no shade. But toilet-paper earplugs
strain out some grating notes,
dull our contagious rage.

Beyond the harbor buoys

what look like white and orange wings
lean into each turn, single file:
far-off shimmering boats,
wringing strength from the wind,
soothe us sweating fools.

Bryn Fleming

WORKING GRAVEYARD

In the deep hours after twelve
Your fears lean on the night-bell.
Loneliness clatters his horse up the hall.
The crazy porter, Death,
Screeches into the turnaround.
You finger the paper lunch. Hunger looks in
On your sleeping bologna like a worried mother.
When you're finally alone in your chair
Leaning back into darkness,
The perfect-you rattles the door,
Asking why you're not a twin,
Asking to come in, come in.

Gregg Kleiner

YEARS OF SHORT KISSES

My father,
silent and big as Norway,
was gone one night
into the dark blue ache of December
without a word.
His coathook behind the door remained
naked for years.

He seldom spoke:

even at dinner
with his glasses of red wine,
from his chair
behind the evening paper,
in the car
driving us to Mass on Sunday mornings
smelling of shaving cream and Saturday night,
out-of-place tie spilling down his chest.

Each morning,
pausing at the breadboard to pick up his lunchpail,
he stooped to kiss my mother's cheek.
Each evening,
beer on his breath and black beneath his nails,
he kissed her again
on his way to the ice box for an Oly stubby.

I never saw them kiss any other time.
He never kissed any of us.

He left her
with five kids,
without a kiss,
with years of short, stupid kisses--
Cheerios strewn across the kitchen floor.

Truman Price

AUTUMN IN THE BOEING PLANT

Building the world's biggest room, they said.
The two ironworkers fell right behind me.
I was in the drainage ditch, on my knees
in the sand, bolting rails for concrete forms.
The rod-busters worked a hundred feet up,
on I-beams, in the clouds beneath the roof.

The worlds of work form their own universe:
this kind builds walls of chaotic noise.
Beneath the roar of trucks and dozers, cranes
and screaming sanders, drills and metal saws
and unseen ironworkers banging rivets home,
the cries of slipping men would whisper low.

The roof collected pools of rain water
that drained through unsealed cracks to fray with height
into a continual thin drizzle;
bright streams of white sparks sprayed into warm slag
and the big pieces png!-ed off your hard hat.
The two may have dropped like ripe fruit, or flown
shrieking, brokenwinged birds; no one saw.

Their two red helmets may have rung like bells
on concrete, no one close enough to tell.
I was twenty feet away, six feet down,
tightening form nuts with a grit-covered wrench,
my palms blistered white, knuckles banged raw, drizzle
running off my tin hat, down my neck.

That's how we spent our day, we carpenters:
cursing the cold and wet, stuck in the sand,
the lowest level of the pyramid.
The meat wagon was in and packed them out;
the other ironworkers were off the job,
home drinking beer, before I heard a thing.

POETRY AND CANNING SALMON

I used to love salmon,
the rich grainy flesh,
the slippery-tongued delicacy,
Until I worked at the packing plant
(New England Canneries, sole
support of La Conner, Washington).
My job was to disentangle
broken fish-- shit work
for the newcomer.
Bones, grease, scales and flesh
all mangled and mingled together;
pull them out with both hands
And throw them back on the conveyor belt.
Also, I used to like poems,
then I took a course in poetry.

Henry Carlile

BUTCHERING CRABS

All day we smashed and swore,
filling the brine tanks
with twitching claws and legs,
white belly meat,
dropping the entrails
and deep-dish violet shells
down a slime hole to the bay.
Even Hawk, our best butcher,
got pinched.
Those claws cut
through our heaviest gloves.
When we broke them off
they clamped down tighter.

"Take that, you buckethead!"
the shell shattering
like crockery.
"You'll never bite another
Indian!"
Stabbing his hands
into that cage of maniacs,
clattering and seething,
bubbling at the mouths,
glare of stalked eyes,
claws like open traps,
he would snap one up
and in one smooth movement
break it over the knife.

*She dips her fork
into the cocktail,
lifts it to her perfect face
and eats.
Over miles of white tablecloth
the bits and pieces fall.*

He lived in a shack
with newspaper curtains,
drove home each night
crabby and skidding.
On the third day
they gave me my check:
"Too slow, sonny."
But Hawk was fast,
he was faster than life.

Henry Carlile

GRAVEYARD SHIFT

I never met you but heard the story often
of the boots and wallet and the note
beside the chipper chute, no explanation,
no clue why you died with your boots off
as if you had merely gone to bed with blades
like a forty-foot hemlock chipped in seconds.
I imagine you were lonely or betrayed
or afflicted with some terminal illness--
who knows what?-- or with the need to disappear
so completely no trace might improve
the claim of your absence.
Unable to cheat death you could at least
cheat those of us who make a living from it.
I do you a disservice then in writing this:

Asking why you chose that way,
a brief red stain in a blur of chips,
riding the high-speed conveyor, poured
level to level, rising above us until
you dropped into the chip bin and from there
into the tall iron digester,
cooked with steam and caustic soda
and bleached white as an angel, unrecoverable
from the paper machine and the paper cutters,
reamed and packaged and sold-- a rag-bond
reduction of your former self, for business,
for profit, for this present monstrous need
to scribble something out of nothing
and resurrect you, emptied from the page.

Gary L. Lark

V.A. HOSPITAL, 1966

The month before I quit
a Vietnam case came in,
a small red-haired man/boy
shattered into tenderness.

Added to the strange history in rows
of bed frames and white sheets
from the Spanish-American War
to this rose of pain starting to bloom

he stood waiting beyond confusion.
He couldn't tie his shoes.
He was incontinent.
When he was told to move he moved.

All the walls gone,
only nerves dangling
in the artificial light.
How I wished the President
were helping me change the sheets.

Erik Muller

CAFE

That looks like Pete's car outside
the cafe, though his widow
sold it after he died.

It looks like Pete is back from
vacation, sitting in the booth
stirring in non-dairy creamer with a spoon.

It looks like the whole crowd
there behind the steamy window
telling lies and exchanging jokes.

It looks a lot like death himself
inside with everybody, dressed
in a windbreaker with a tavern's name on its back.

It looks like he has just leaned toward Pete
with smoke clouding his gaze, softening
his question, How much you want for that car?

It looks like Pete replies at once
with his little laugh that sounds like gravel,
Well, sir, she ain't for sale.

Hannah Wilson

AT THE HOFFMAN TELEVISION FACTORY, 1953

My benchmate Olga taught me to solder
and I taught her baseball.

"Hold," she says
"like the iron to curl the hair,"
and I do, though I had never held anything like
her old-country gadget.

With our left hands we free wires
coiled behind tubes and twisted
under each other. In space fit only
for a small woman's small hand
we insinuate the hot, thin iron,
splice color to color.

Noon they let us turn on
assembled sets. We watch the news
and I explain America to Olga:
Ike throws out the Senators' first ball.
Julius and Ethel Rosenberg
walk their last mile. I tell her
it is not really a mile.

For the World Series they keep the sets on
all day. We follow swings
from screen to screen. Wires
move down the line. Olga learns
fundamentals. She yells like a native
for Brooklyn.

An infield ump shouts "Balk!"
Big Vic Raschi punches his glove,
scuffs up dirt. Jackie Robinson advances
to third.

How can I explain in words still foreign
this complication beyond language--
that in baseball there is punishment
for not pausing
in the execution of your pitch.

Brenda Shaw

BUSINESS LUNCH

Shouldn't have had it,
that second glass of wine.
My liver won't like it.

Liver, hell! My liver can cope.
It's got all the right enzymes
to settle two glasses of wine.
But what about my brain?

That clever sod across the table
isn't put off by two glasses of wine.
But / am-- my brain is made of jelly
and it's alcohol-soluble.

Elizabeth Campbell

NUDE CLEANING A BATHTUB

Rejoice and be glad
this is not a painting.
Rippling flesh pressing cold porcelain
is no longer a subject suitable for framing.
We like lean young women dancing naked in mirrors
with breasts mimicking monkeys and fruit.

When they made this one, they destroyed the mold.
At forty, she broke away from form
into cellulitic energy,
burning up sands run out on her hourglass.
Ancient world to herself, she is out
to kill every living organism
at league against her in this bathroom.

Years of intimacy with grout
have taught her faith in the abrasive.
Ajax is her consort,
shelved now while this great goddess
in single-handed combat
discharges her caustic Comet,
battles the scum and the staphylococci,
laughing at death.

Troy never knew such carnage.
Hell has no fury like one wild warring woman
with a can of chlorine.
Her bared arms flail the tiles,
her flanks exposed and her rear brazenly unguarded.
Who would dare take her from behind?

Robert McDowell

WORKING A #30 SASH TOOL, THINKING ABOUT THE POPE

"There is no hurt in this profession," Buck muttered,
Checking a door for skippers.
He was thinking about spaghetti
And glancing at his watch--10:30.
He reminded himself that he was tough
And could take it. He worked like that awhile,
Taunted by the vision of a savory meat sauce.

Meanwhile the radio informed him of the Pope's condition.
The Pope was dead, was gravely wounded.
The Pope escaped serious injury.
Bystanders were injured or praying.
One bullet was fired and there were many,
The assailant acted alone and with others.

Buck was furious.
He hated the voices feeding him news.
He hated bleeders supporting gun control.
"The trouble with foreigners," he grumbled,
"Is that they sing too loud and lose their tempers."

Buck devised a program of blood control.
He wondered just how his country could do that
And did not think of his Scotch and German forebears.
He was American, the best damn painter in L.A.
Didn't he mix his own colors?
Hadn't he won the unofficial contest?

"Nobody will shoot me in this profession," he stammered.
Then he crossed himself and prayed for the Pope.
Up on the ladder he felt close to God
And thought of the Pope falling into the arms of his secretary.
Had he fallen like a lovesick girl,
Or like a child walking a ledge,
Astonished at missing a step?

These images of softness were foreign, also.
Flustered, Buck shook himself thinking,
"He fell like a man shot in a jeep."
But a voice somewhere was saying,

The Pope is not a man.

Buck finished off
a run of putty and spoke as wood might speak--

"He fell."

To save himself Buck thought about his wife,
Happy in her kitchen,
Who had probably turned the radio off,
Hating the terror
And intrusion on her easy listening.
He knew that the look on her face
Would be grim as she'd turn to her recipe box
With a passion he could not name.
He saw her greeting him in the driveway.
He'd puff up like bread in her arms
And she'd say,

"Isn't it awful?"

Guess what we're having for supper."

"The world is sick but I'm getting by," Buck snarled,
Working a toothbrush dipped in thinner under his nails.

He was looking ahead to the Lodge
And a round of golf,
To the next job and the next.
He was doing his part.
Not for himself or his wife,
Not for you or me. Just doing it.

Barbara Baldwin

EIGHT TO FIVE

The blue and white page typed balance
due cranks out, a blank cranks in, carriage
return. *Debit. Credit. Balance Due.*

Wind whips snow. The air is agitated.
There's fish for dinner and I'll remember
to buy milk. Once when the children

were small and cried while I tried
to plant a garden, or made mud cakes as I raked,
naked to the waist in sun and motherhood,

a plane flew low and slowly the length
of our island. In other fields, planes
strewed napalm. *Tab. Tab. Balance Due.*

The air is white lace. In Afghanistan
a man gives sleeping pills to his children
and carries them through snow across the border.

No answer to the telephone at home,
the school bus must be late.
Cars choke the road, churn snow.

We stand on a ledge in time
roped waist to waist. *Statements*
equal accounts receivable. Remember milk.

Martha Gatchell

BRUSH CLEARING

"Under the limb, an old dead rosebush.
As soon as it jabbed me, I knew what it was.
It still hurts. Those things are fierce!
Four deer now, in the orchard: two does,
a fawn, and a forked-horn. Come look."

I stack the last plate in the rack.
Beyond the window, dusk
blurs the path to the creek,
the rose-and-blackberry-tangled
tall old stump beside the bridge.

Water swirls down the drain,
leaving an iridescent film of grease,
tumble of food scraps in soapy froth:
lettuce, a naked strand of spaghetti,
breadcrumbs, a rag of meat.

I linger, looking out,
wiping the sink, remembering already
the darkening day, creek's gleam
in soft gray light, the easy rhythm
of this familiar task, the brush pile
you were clearing this afternoon in the rain,

what you came in, dripping,
to tell me beside the fire,
stripping the soaked glove from your hand,
searching out the thorn.

George H. S. Singer

VISITING GRANDPA WHEN I CAN'T DECIDE ON A CAREER

Grandpa holds court in his armchair.
Hands wave through cigar smoke with the matter-of-fact air
of the shtetl that says, "We are no fools."
He lists all the peoples he has known and their accounts
in his book:
"Your Scotsman will always ask for credit,
but he'll pay up in due time.
But your Irishman will try on every suit in the store
and leave without shedding a dime.
And your shvartza-- well, you know, I am of the old school
about the shvartza . . ."
He leaves the cruel
opinion unfinished and then turns to my dilemma.
He is transmitting his wisdom culled in narrow places
pinning and unpinning shirts and flattering the faces
of strangers in the body-length mirror
behind the stacks of receipts and dreary
rows of shiny shoes
so his grandson can read Marx and Camus
in stately college yards.
"And this idea that people should have work that they like!"
He throws his bewilderment with open palms toward the sky
and flails at the air as if an alien creature,
something known only in goyisha homes,
like a bat, suddenly flitters through this room:
"That idea is new . . . who . . . I mean who
would have thought it in my day?"
and he reaches inside to smile fondly in his dismay.

REVIEW: THE WORK OF TOM WAYMAN

The Canadian poet Tom Wayman has some interesting things to say on the subject of work and poetry, on the relationship of work to poetry. In one of his essays he writes:

"At the center of our lives . . . I see the overwhelming majority of us going to work each day, and I see how the work we do profoundly influences nearly every aspect of our time alive. Where we live, how well we live, how much free time we have, how much mental and physical energy we have when off work, are all a consequence of the jobs we have or of our search for employment. Our attitudes to nearly every aspect of our existence, including to those traditional subjects of English-language poetry-- love, death and nature, are also enormously influenced by the kind of work we do. Who our friends are, what our response is to how society uses the material and natural objects of this planet, and much, much more are all affected in a major way by our employment or lack of it."

This makes good sense. We may not have thought of it in quite this way before, but when we do come to think of it, it seems to be true: how we are derives in good measure from what we do. Wayman continues this line of thought by making an even more interesting statement:

"And yet, as I have written about elsewhere at length, in our culture there is an almost pathological aversion to presenting an accurate portrayal of daily work. Whether you flip around the television dial, scan the shelves of a bookstore, or attend a ballet or play, an accurate assessment of what it is like for us to go to work is a taboo subject."

For nearly twenty years Tom Wayman has been outspoken in his attempts not merely to call attention to this curious taboo, but to overcome it. As the author of a dozen volumes of his own poetry, plus a book of essays outlining his ideas, as the editor of four anthologies of contemporary North American working poems, as the founder of both the Kootenay School of Writing and the Vancouver Industrial Writers Union, and as an indefatigable letter-writer and networker, Wayman has almost single-handedly given legitimacy to the terms "work writing" and "work poems".

For anyone unacquainted with Wayman's work, his third anthology, *Going for Coffee: Poetry on the Job*, is a good place to start. First published in 1981 and re-issued in 1987, it consists of some 220 poems by 93 U.S. and Canadian poets, poets ranging in occupation from obstetrician to Cat-skinner, from housewife to oilfield worker. The poems themselves are fresh and original free-verse compositions-- none of the rhymed doggerel usually associated with "worker poetry". Little stories, factual accounts imaginatively rendered, whimsical anecdotes, even jokes, told by people who know what they're talking about, and told with verve and gusto. The colloquial tone is more often than not shaded with a wry, sometimes grim humor. This is the stuff of people's lives. It rings true.

To point out the occasional clumsiness of the writing would be merely to quibble; what must be said about these poems is that they are all authentic, they are all interesting, and they are all readable. In fact, I don't know of any anthology of poems that is so eminently readable as this.

A long-awaited successor volume to *Going for Coffee* is scheduled for publication this summer. Entitled *Paperwork: Contemporary Poems from the Job*, it promises to be an even more exciting collection of sally, down-to-earth poems.

Wayman's own poetry is *sui generis*. Composed of loose, conversational poetic lines that are fitted to the natural cadences of everyday speech, it has as one of its most striking features a tremendous range-- range of subject matter, range of mood, range of sympathy and concern. Wayman wears seven-league boots: he covers a lot of ground, covers it with enormous strides. There is something gargantuan about the way his poems move-- from place to place and topic to topic, from tender lyricism to shrill invective, from quiet observation of rural scenes to the deafening roar and clatter of industrial machinery.

There is a lot of highway in his poems-- winter highways in Alberta, highways in the spring in Wyoming; sweeping down out of British Columbia through Oregon on I-5 headed for southern California, "headed for a destination not yet reached." Travelling. Travelling of any kind. One of his poems is significantly titled "Listening to Country Music in the Cabin of a CP Air 747 Jumbo en route Toronto to Vancouver".

These are not distilled, hermetic poems; for the most part they are big, sprawling poems, poems writ furiously large, in bold print, embodying the "barbaric yawp". Whitman, yes; and maybe something of Allen Ginsberg, too; but the poet that Wayman most resembles is the great Chilean poet Pablo Neruda (and in fact the only literary allusions throughout his work are a couple of poems to and about Neruda).

Like Neruda, Tom Wayman has an axe to grind: he execrates the socio-economic system that enables a privileged few to make obscene amounts of money while a luckless minority grovel for welfare or stand in unemployment lines, and the vast middle majority labor at ever more soul-deadening jobs in factory-like conditions or bureaucratic squirrel-cages, returning home in the evening to watch insipid, glamorized versions of themselves on the television screen. He is enraged by the degradation of all forms of life on this planet, and his rage is palpable. His latest book (1989) includes a sequence of 14 poems under the general title "Greed Suite"; it is a powerful (and wonderfully imaginative) treatment of the permutations of greed.

At the same time he is capable of writing a moving sequence of poems to a good friend dying of leukemia. And there are many poems of friendship, of the good times talking and playing and working with friends.

But above all, there is humor. Even at his most vituperative, even in several "Cursing Poems", there is the play of humor around the edges. In a number of poems he refers to himself in the third person, and thereby creates a marvellous character-- "Wayman". This "Wayman" character crops up again and again: "Wayman in Love", "Wayman Ascending into

the Middle Class", etc. Here is a poem-- and it's a good note to end on-- called "The Day After Wayman Got the Nobel Prize":

The day after Wayman got the Nobel Prize
he discovered the problem was still there:
how good are his poems?
The poems that are not particularly staggering, or new
to him, or the one that is a terse masterpiece in the afternoon
and is empty by nine o'clock that night.
Always the clean page and the words, the English words.
And what for?

Not to mention the rent, if no difficulty now
as Wayman unfolds the strange cheque from Sweden
then in a month or so, when the landlord drops by again.
And the car needs plugs and points.
And there is the lovely round body of the beautiful woman
Wayman has never been able to touch.

Like the Monday after the Revolution
when we were told to drive to work as usual
so on the morning after a little success Wayman still
can't help knocking the sugar over as he reaches for coffee.

The day after his acceptance speech was published
and again after his reading at Carnegie Hall
Wayman began to wonder
about the day after death.

Note: The following is a partial list of Tom Wayman's books. These are available through his U.S. distributor: Left Bank Books, 4142 Brooklyn Ave. N.E., Seattle, WA 98105 (Prices given are in US\$ and are for paperback editions. In ordering, add \$1.65 for the first book and \$0.35 for each additional book, for shipping and handling.)

Poetry:

Introducing Tom Wayman: Selected Poems 1973-1980 (\$6.00)

Counting the Hours: City Poems, 1983 (\$9.95)

The Face of Jack Munro, 1986 (\$7.95)

In a Small House on the Outskirts of Heaven, 1989 (\$8.95)

Essays:

Inside Job: Essays on the New Work Writing, 1983 (\$7.00)

Editor:

Going for Coffee: Poetry on the Job, 1981 (\$8.95)

Clem Starck

EDITORS' NOTES

GUEST EDITOR: Clem Starck, Dallas, edited all of this issue. What began as a plan for a section of an issue grew to a full issue of work poetry. Clem is a carpenter by trade, presently working for OSU in Corvallis. He has read this year at Salem, Eugene and Albany. His book *Journeyman's Wagon* is due from Story Line Press.

FIREWEED POTLUCK AND OPEN READING: you are invited to a get together of poets and subscribers and friends of *Fireweed*, rain or shine, Sunday, September 15, noon to 5 pm, at Oak Grove Grange west of Salem. Please bring a dish for four and service. *Fireweed* will provide tea, coffee, and juice. The Grange prohibits alcoholic beverages.

Directions: Oak Grove Grange is NE of Rickreall Junction of Hwy 99W and Hwy 22. Approach from Salem: 5.5 miles west of Salem's Willamette River Bridge, turn N on Oak Grove Rd., just after Brunk House. 3 miles to the Grange. Approach from 99W: 3.5 miles N of Rickreall Junction take Farmer Rd. (just after Flynn Vineyard) E 2.5 miles on dirt road. Grange, church and school in view of both roads at their junction.

COVER: This issue's cover is a woodcut by Corvallis artist Darryla Green-McGrath.

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

BARBARA BALDWIN, Corvallis, one of the founders of *Calyx*, worked for many years as a secretary and a bookkeeper. She is now an editor for Western Rural Development Center.

AUGUST BAUNACH, Corvallis, in addition to being a baker, is a Saab mechanic and a washing-machine repairman, and has worked in a bicycle shop. At the moment he is studying technical writing at Oregon State University.

ELIZABETH CAMPBELL, Corvallis, is not employed as a cleaning-woman but rather as an associate professor of English at OSU.

HENRY CARLILE, Portland, has been a millworker, a canneryworker, a commercial fisherman, a clerk, a military bandsman, a shipfitter, and a production-control coordinator. Now he teaches at Portland State University.

TOM CRAWFORD, Hebo, worked for three years as a switchman/brakeman on the Southern Pacific Railroad between Bakersfield and Fresno before taking up teaching.

RICHARD DANKLEFF, Corvallis, sailed as a merchant seaman in the days

before container ships and super-tankers. His 1984 volume *Westerns* should have won the Pulitzer Prize, but didn't.

BARBARA DRAKE is a northern Yamhill County shepherdess and bookkeeper. She also teaches English at Linfield College in McMinnville.

BRYN FLEMING, Portland, has just returned from crewing on a sailboat in the Caribbean. An accomplished traveller, she has worked in places as diverse as Sea World and a cigarette-carton factory in Australia. She is also a practicing clairvoyant and psychic healer.

MARTHA GATCHELL lives, works, and writes on a small farm in the Coast Range outside of Drain. She is employed part-time by the Oregon State Forest Nursery.

CHARLES (a.k.a. CHIP) GOODRICH, Corvallis, a former gravedigger and confirmed bachelor, has recently married and now works as a gardener for the Benton County Parks Department.

JAMES B. HALL, Eugene, a much published novelist and short-fiction writer, started work at the age of 14 in the threshing ring of an Ohio farm. While a professor of literature and provost of the arts college at UC Santa Cruz, he was the founding president of National Writers Union, Local #7.

RON NETHERTON JOHNSON, Portland, has "worked at various low-paying but politically correct (PC) jobs" such as teaching journalism in the Upward Bound Program at PSU, tutoring grade-school students for the Indian Education Act, and working in a residential treatment facility.

GREGG KLEINER, Corvallis, is co-owner and business manager of Terra Pacific Writing Corp., which produces technical manuals for clients on both sides of the Pacific.

GARY L. LARK, Corvallis, has sold musical instruments and men's clothes; he has run an art gallery, and been a carpenter and a janitor. Now he is a librarian for the city of Corvallis.

ROBERT McDOWELL, Brownsville, has worked on a newspaper and in a tannery, as well as being a house-painter. For years he co-edited *The Reaper*, and is now publisher and editor of Story Line Press.

ERIK MULLER, Eugene, a native New Yorker, lived for 17 years in Coos Bay where he taught at Southwestern Oregon Community College. He is one of the regular editors of *Fireweed*.

ROBERT PETERSON, Capitola, California, was poet-in-residence this past winter at Willamette University in Salem. Author of many volumes, he is a consummate poet and was formerly in the hotel business.

TRUMAN PRICE, Monmouth, is a man for all seasons. A carpenter by trade, he is also a folklorist and fiddler, and can be heard playing music up and down the Willamette Valley.

CARLOS REYES, Portland, has worked at hundreds of jobs over the past 45 years, starting at age 10 when he vaccinated turkeys for a dollar an hour. He has fought forest fires, done offshore commercial fishing, been a land-surveyor and a road-builder, among many other things.

VERN RUTSALA, Portland, comes originally from darkest rural Idaho, where the distinction between working and cursing is not easily made. The publication this year of his Selected Poems is a notable event in American poetry.

BRENDA SHAW, Eugene, has been a farm worker, waitress and secretary. She then trained as a scientist and worked for many years at a Scottish medical school.

GEORGE H.S. SINGER, Eugene, is a research scientist at the Oregon Research Institute. Prior to that, he and his wife Joanne lived and worked at Shasta Abbey in Mt. Shasta, California, where they became disciples of Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett.

HANNAH WILSON, Eugene, has worked pasting labels on perfume bottles, wiring television sets, buffing hand-wrought pewter, typing court testimony, and "teaching, teaching, teaching"-- in Istanbul, Ibadan (Nigeria), and Eugene.