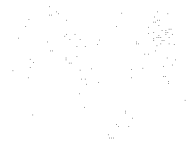


SKY RIVER
by
Nan Hannon



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*for my sisters and brothers
Regina and Kate, Ron and John*

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NOTE: A centered asterisk indicates a poem has been broken mid-stanza.

Introduction

Stones become his bread. They feed him.
Grey loaves all around him.

“Archaeologist”

The sensibility that can make grey loaves of boulders is that of the poet, but the experience is that of the scientist. There are those whose daily bread is stone: geologists, archaeologists, who learn, know, work with, live with, live by the stones, rocks, dirt, the matter of the earth.

Theoretical scientists, who go inward into the mind following abstract forms and quantities, and laboratory scientists, who shut out the world in order to control it, approach poetry from the far side, through the ultraviolet of thought; but fieldworkers, the scientists who consider touch, weight, shape, color, quality, who learn the heft and place and relation of stones, bones, baskets, tools, carving, sounds, words, who handle things as they turn up — fieldworkers are the poets of matter. When one of them is also a poet of words, she can share with us that making work, and nourish us with stone bread and rock soup.

Since “science fiction” is a term often used by literary people to segregate and denigrate, I don’t want to talk about “science poetry.” But there is a kind of poetry for which we need a name (as we need a name that isn’t pejorative for its fictional equivalent), a luminously intellectual poetry informed by the attitude or knowledge of science. The first such poem is Lucretius’ *Nature of Things*, and that is still its subject matter, the nature of things.

Quaint as it seems, there are people who continue to assert exclusive allegiance to one or the other of C.P. Snow’s “two cultures,” still denying frantically that art and science can have anything to do with each other, despite mountainous centuries of evidence to the contrary, and the evident mean-spiritedness of such territoriality. Science and art have always collaborated, since they are both major technologies of human existence, ways of learning/using/praising/being in the world. They are different technologies, of course, but nothing ultimately puts them in confrontation but the jealousy of specialists and the awful timidity of the human mind, which will cower at its tiny campfire, back turned to the darkness in which, perhaps, fanged palaeontologists stalk, or feral poets gibber in the trees.

Around certain campfires, more courageous souls are telling stories or singing songs in which the knowledge of the scientists and the knowledge of the artists work together, making one thing, a beautiful, useful thing.

In the poems of the first section of this book, archaeology is not a metaphor only. It is the substance of the work. This is a work about work, and about substance — matter — earth and stone and the hands that lift, move, find, make. Wordplay (assured, skillful, joyful) is neither beginning nor end of this work, but means: the technology: the way the thing is made beautiful and useful.

The poet has license, even a directive, to make explicit what the scientist is required to keep implicit and suppressed: the emotions that motivate and respond to the work. In the case of archaeology these feelings are likely to include not only a celebration and appreciation of material thingness, presence, and a strong sense of the passage of time, but also a passionate interest, a tenderness, felt towards the "subjects of the investigation," the owners of the bones, the users of the pots, the old lost lives. One who has read their books or listened to the conversation of archaeologists has probably felt the strength of that silent, imaginative, accurate, and disinterested love. It is a pleasure to hear it spoken aloud, however quietly, as in "Site 35JA1" and other poems of this collection.

And new lives coming among old lives, the living among the dead, recognizing them, recognizing themselves: this is a very fitting subject for poetry. This is a true matter.

In the second part of the book the poet's eye turns from what is before or under or beyond history to the historic, that is, the momentary. Her words touch these matters with the same exact gentleness. But she is drawn back in the end again to stones, and the ghosts of stones, and the ghosts in stones. This poetry is a lithography, a petroglyphic art: figures of antelope, women, the sun, the soul, scratched on rock, visible most clearly when the light falls slant from the West.

Ursula K. Le Guin

I
Field Work

Patterned Ground

Plowed ground holds promise.
So we walk the Agate Desert firebreak,
searching the turned earth
for chunks of light,
stone grown transparent.
Wind-lifted, sparks
could still jump this strip.
We walk well apart, eyes down.

When we walk on cobbles
the size of the heart,
you call it patterned ground.
You show me the low places
that hold summer rain.
Explain how a hollow
deepens itself over time,
paved with stones that surface
as the earth washes down.

We know those summer storms.
The hard clouds
that break on the Cascades.
The thunder.
Sudden rain.
The violence
that makes enclosure.
The quiet place.

We sit down in the hollow
to share our treasures:
eyes of agate, jasper
blood-red on the palm.
Close in the soul's small home.
Where water gathers.
Where stones rise.
Even stones.

Mapping the Philpot Site, Coquille River

Floodtide.
Stake by stake
the site disappears
as the salt rush
up the veins of the drainage
covers the laced branches
of the fish traps,
the ancient weirs.
Angled upriver
by the Coquille fishermen,
cage after sharp cage
tangled and pierced
eels and salmon,
and the harbor seals
that chased them inland.
Their grey bones mingle
with the alder staves
and willow plaiting.

Among the salt-eaten sticks
we hammer in our milled pine stakes.
Tie datum after datum
with flagging tape.
Jog our transit and plumb bob
from spot to spot
until we weave our own small trap
to catch the slippery past.
Then we move fast
out of the drowning mud flat,
upslope to the salt grass,
laughing at the booted grace
of our escape,
while the Coquille slips in
and fills our tracks.

Above the tidegate, artifacts erode
from the bank: cobble tools and cores
of jasper, jade and sard,
fractured exactly, good weight in the hand.
Flakes litter the sand, bright scatter,
right down to the water, and star among them,
a tanged point shines, heart of the past,
fragile and enduring.

God, give us work that outlasts us.
Good work.

for Reg Pullen

Field Work

Twelve hours
into the forest
your guide said: Keep right!
and turned back.

For two days
you followed a track
crossed and mazed
by elephant paths.
For two nights
you trusted your dominant eye,
your dominant hand,
to point you right.

White spirit,
the children ran
when you appeared.
The women looked scared.
Only brave men greeted you
in a tongue you didn't know.
Net-hunters.
Men the size of children.

Your hands asked
for your needs.
Meat. Sleep.
Dark eyes heard
the words you couldn't say.
Let you stay.
Children came
to pat your face.

Traveller,
with neither thread
nor breadcrumbs,
year after year

*

you find your way
home
from the other country.
Tell us your tales.

Teach us the words
that open the way:
Keep right!
Keep right!

for Barry Hewlett

Archaeologist

Through the winter of hard rains
he camps on the floodplain
where the Shasta pit-homes stood.
When the creek is in flood, the nights ring
with the cries of boulders shouldering each other.
In his dreams, the stones call out to him.
Each dawn he probes the outwash
for scrapers, blanks, flakes,
the rare spindle of dentalium.

Arrowheads work their way
through the earth, pierce the surface,
wanting to be found,
to be held again by a human hand.
He understands. Fingers them.
His thumb comes to know edges,
his tongue the iron taste of blood.
Stones become his bread. They feed him.
Grey loaves all around him.

He finds a cache of river cobbles
in a meadow off Dead Indian Road.
Game stones or spirit stones.
Who knows?
He gathers up the bones of answers.
Each one speaks a name
that petrifies his tongue,
dry pebble in the bed of his mouth.
His eyes harden.

He unearths a mano.
Holds it in his hand
until his wrist aches with the weight,
thinking of a woman grinding acorns
in the oak woodland above Emigrant Creek,
giving herself up to the work
until her patience and her steady strength

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wear down the very stone.
rounding it like water flowing.

She speaks to him
as water speaks to stone.
Softly. Ceaselessly.
Leads him to the spring
that rises from black rock.
Enough stones in his pocket
to sink him. he kneels on the bank
and drinks. Water alive in his throat.
Charged. Carbonate.

He looks up at the last light
on the sharp face of the mountain.
a honed edge scraping the sky.
Sits still as stone.
Hard things his study.

for Jeff LaLande

Point

This birthday gift
was made for you
two hundred years ago.
Two thousand maybe.

Laid here at the doorstep
yet to be built,
it waited long for your eye,
your hand.

Jasper, gold
as an aspen leaf in fall,
cold on the palm,
but quick to warm.

Raw. Untempered.
Never used.
A gift for you to finish?
Who laid it down knows.

Luck of your pocket,
twenty times a day
it grazes your thigh.
Thing undone. Reminder.

for Glenn Northcross

Flintknapper

One blow splits the cobble,
dark nodule of obsidian.
Reveals the secret heart.
The bright blackness within.

Tapping and turning,
you facet the core.
Set up the ridges.
Abrade the platform.

Controlled and quick,
you detach the flakes.
Black razors fall on your palm.
Toolmaker. Man.

Long after dark,
the bell-blows
of your hammerstone
still echo in the yard.

Musical as rain,
the shards fall.
The stone sings
in your bleeding hands.

for Dave Henry

Passage

In Burns the Greyhound comes
late to the Chevron station.
out of the stars and the sagebrush.
out of the long emptiness.
to this desert glare.
Blinking in the sudden brightness.
women wake their tired babies.
The driver takes a slow stretch.
Cowboys step out for a cigarette
in the fluorescence of the service island.
their faces harshly lit.
Twenty years unmet.
I emerge in no hurry.
my small luggage close to my chest.

The surprise of your face
at the edge of the night
brings tears to my eyes.
Neither father nor lover.
you embrace me. dear stranger.
Amazing grace. the strength of that embrace.
The tired travellers board.
The bus roars away.
into the stars and the sagebrush.
into the long emptiness.
But I stay in this oasis of light.
Finally arrived.

Sky River

Night ride under the August sky.
High above the Harney Basin lights
you stop the car to praise
the salt scatter of stars
and the white spill of the Milky Way.
You tell me, teacher, that the Chinese
call that flow Sky River.
Below that vast glow
we stand small in the desert cold,
glad of each other's hands.

The Old Ones said it takes three days
for the ghost to cross the sky,
walking west, the way the sun goes.
But how, you ask, shall we cross
that whitewater, Sky River?

Each path is practice.
And rock to rock on the desert slope,
or the lava flow,
I've let my footsteps fall in yours,
dear dancer, following your way,
seeing the grace your crossing will be:
balanced in the heart of the flow,
stone to shining stone,
star to star.

for Mel Aikens

Petroglyph Lake

In this deflation,
out of the wind,
a scatter of obsidian.
A scoured millingstone
faces the old lake bed.
Kneeling at the slab to see
the old view with new eyes,
we watch antelope bound upslope
into the arms of juniper,
gracile. Their white rumps
flash like smiles.

On the basalt walls
the petroglyphs grow faint.
Fingers trace dots and mazes.
Heat waves. The glad dance
of hunter and prey.
Fat antelope caper
across the rock face.

What changes?
Lizards run the desert pavement.
Deer mice scuttle through our tent.
Stones rattle in the creek bed.
In the dry camp, desert friends
share water and the welcome
warmth of the campfire.
As the embers die,
the stars brighten.
White herd.
One by one they cross the ridge
out of this world.

for Lawrence Powell and Bob Hartwig

Site 35JA1

A hearth-ring filled
with fire-cracked rock.
Bird bone.
Beneath the ash,
a burial.
One alone.
A hunter maybe,
far from home.

All night the mourners
fed the fire with oak.
Madrone.
Sparks flew up.
Not far.
Quick stars,
brief as life.
The smoke rose higher.

All night
one hunter worked
by firelight.
Struck sparks
from rock
with his handstone,
graving the world-egg,
waiting to be born.

Now lake waters
lick the ash.
Lichen
covers the stone.
Earth works
the white bone.
A hunter maybe,
far from home.

for Erma and Eldon Scriptor

Suggested Research

Count tanged arrowheads.
Run your thumb along an edge.
Watch your blood bead up.
Red.
Ask: Can these points still kill?

Map strata.
Dark layers of habitation
interlaid with sterile soil.
Blow the dust from your hands.
Ask: How thick is a life?

Sift Mazama ash
washed downriver to this site
seven thousand years back.
Taste it.
Ask: What makes a mountain die?

This house-pit scar.
Circular.
As if a flying saucer set down here.
Sleep in it.
Ask: Who dreams?

John Gibbs' Grave, Ashland

This is the grave of John Gibbs,
killed by an Indian called Sambo,
with a gun snatched from his own hand.
"If I had a thousand lives,
I'd trust them all to Sambo."
he'd reassured his friends
when the Indian Wars began.
Sambo grinned and fired twice,
grinned as the surprised man died.
Or so the white survivors wrote.
In black and white.

Today we come to shoot poor John again,
where he lies in the yellow sand.
The sun shines hard on the marble,
a glare too white to read,
so you call me to help you shadow the grave,
and we stand shoulder to shoulder,
our bodies closing into one dark shape
that lets the camera see
the name and death-date.
I feel the throb of the shutter
as it moves down your arm,
and then we come apart,
two thin shadows lying long
over grave and ground.

You shoot me twice as I kneel
feeling the letters
on a lichen-covered stone.
If I had a thousand lives,
I might trust you.
But I have only one,
and you stop it here,
when I am thirty-two, like John.
A small betrayal. No surprise.
You smile as you take my life.
Make it black and white.

Sargent Sambo's Grave, Hornbrook

In a cigar box under his bed
he kept a picture of himself
at seventeen:
dark-eyed boy in buckskin.
Heavy on his brow
the headdress of his father,
blood-red with the scalps
of a hundred woodpeckers.
"I'm no chief," he laughed
to the whites who asked
eighty years later.
Half-blind handyman
in a Hornbrook shack.
Chief of nothing.
When he died who survived
to break shell money on his grave.
to whiten the sand with dentalia?

The undertaker guessed at the first date,
for who knew when he was born?
Son of a dark time.
The sergeant at Fort Jones
gave him his name.
Gave him his Army coat
when he left for home.

Shasta.
The word itself is a whisper.
Sastise.
White word. Sharp as the peak.
The last who spoke Shasta claimed
every house-post had a name.

Kahosadi,
they called themselves.
The people who speak true.
Who knows that tongue now?
Who knew that tongue then?

In jargon, they bargained
for horses. Guns.
Traded salmon for baskets.
Baskets for women.
Truth confused in transaction.
Now there is no translation.

Older than the graves
of men slain in the Indian Wars.
ponderosas grow between the headstones.
Blue herons nest there, high,
almost out of sight,
coming at twilight from the river
to feed their nestlings,
to rest in the rocking branches.
Their feathers fall, blue-grey,
on the cheap metal plate
with his name and dates.

Hérons.
Klamath River fishers before the Shasta.
And after.

for Shirley Silver

Newgrange Mound

I.

Stone on corbelled stone
I was raised by a folk
that could not measure.

Faith
is the mortar
that keeps me together.

I could no longer be built.
Rock-hold
of an older world.

In five thousand years
no drop of rain seeped into my dark.
I am dry.

And why should I open my soul
to the indignity of mice
or blown leaves?

On the longest day of the year,
the rising sun pierces me
with one finger of light.

So a priest devised it.
He also burned stags and men alive
to please the gods.

I am intact for them.

II.

Her postcard says:
I mastered my fear of confinement
to enter this megalithic monument.

In her walking shoes,
every button buttoned,
she crouches down in the tomb

and smells the old dark
of home.
Her terror lifts.

Does the babe fear the womb?
The shadows fit
like her own garments.

This is what she came to Ireland to find:
the welcome of the long-dead.
The graves with our names on them.

She gropes the stones,
as hard as God,
as cold as sacrifice.

She lies down in the dark,
intact, intact,
waiting for the magic.

for the light to strike.

Advice to an Archaeologist

The hawk knows the sky.
But the sky is empty.

Take as totem
the ground squirrel
watching you from the fence post,
dark-eyed, alert
Go to earth.
Go underground. Out of the sun.
Be the grey digger,
cunning in your runs,
intimate with shoots and roots,
friend of the hidden,
Earth-turner.
Maker of branching ways.
Changer. Changing.

Shake off strength.
Be soft. Small.
Easily hurt.
Alert to the hunger of others.
Be ears and eyes.
Wise in evasion.
Watcher. Gatherer.
Keep what you find
for the cold time,
sleeping among the roots,
dreaming what the grass knows,
what seeds say.

And when you wake,
go down.
Follow the white roots
past their ends.
Come to the oldest stones.
Those you can't name.
Ask them for death
in the warm earth,

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the birthplace,
nested in the dark matrix
of your life
for the long dream.
Your freedom.

Then, practiced in blackness,
unafraid,
feel your way
through the mazes of your making,
deeper and deeper
to that place where all ways open.
Son of the dark kingdom,
find welcome.
Come into your own.
Come home.

for Rich Olmo

The Oak-King

Come to harvest
the grove by the river.
we find the great oak
cleft to the crotch and down,
immense on the ground,
a fallen god still quick
to the leaftips, a thin strip
of cambium channeling life.

When we embrace the rough bark,
its girth is greater
than our circling arms.
We weave through the branches,
plucking one by one
the still-green acorns.

The oak loves lightning,
so it's no surprise
when wind rises in the grove.
Wild doves fly over,
seeking cover in the hedgerow.
Minute by minute
we dare the darkening sky,
to gather every acorn,
more than we brought sacks for.
We want the whole weight
of this harvest.

When the first great drops fall,
you strip to the waist
to make a shirt-bundle of our fruit.
Holding it like a child, you lead me
back up the draw we came down.
Fire-scars blacken the trees.
Along the road, tarweed, its resins
rain-released, turns volatile the very air.
With one strike on the horizon,
lightning could ignite us.

No safety in the Ranger.
where rain rises
from the heat of our bodies,
clouding the windows.
Lightning splits the sky.
A hard hail pounds the roof.
Drivers edge off the highway
to wait out the weather,
to wait out the danger.
We don't stop, but draw it with us.
draw it down, the white storm.
Both hands on the wheel, leaning
forward,
you laugh as you drive blind.
Exulting.

What good is it to claim
the old gods are not our gods?
What good is it to tell the wind
we will not listen?
I think of Midsummer's Eve,
and the oak-king, stripped and blinded,
burned alive and eaten.

II

The Brute Weight of Beauty

Beauty

Beauty took him to the lake
where the pelicans drifted together.
light as snowflakes.

Beauty took him to the rocks
the Modocs marked with signs
he could not read.

At the ranch on the alkali flat
where nothing took root.
he felt Beauty's life beneath his thighs.

saw himself in her shining eye.
In that farmyard.
Beauty marked him as her own.

Crushed his hand with her great hoof.
Crushed his nails into his flesh.
Crushed his flesh into the dust.

He mastered his pain to cry.
"Go on, Beauty, go on."
And she stepped over him.

He wept, but didn't blame her.
Bleeding, he forgave her.
Poor old Beauty, he called her.

All his life he bore, uncomplaining,
the brute weight of Beauty,
the lunular stigma on his palm.

Jennie Wong

China doll.
In photographs you clasp a porcelain child
that fills your lap.
Round-eyed, white-faced baby.
And once you were caught on the porch
of the Wah Chung store, princess
in a white dress, unsmiling beside your father,
the railroad labor contractor,
fat and happy in his prosperity.
Upstairs, three to a bed, pigtailed men
in love with the gum that poppies bleed,
embraced oblivion.

Jennie, in the Railroad District,
the freight of your history shakes our sleep,
and we seek your small ghost
in dark houses and deserted streets,
to make some kind of peace.
But in what gone joss-house shall we find you, child?
Joss being bastard Portuguese for Deos.
Joss being bastard God.

Your playmates are old.
Haltingly, they tell my recorder
what they know of your life:
the starched dresses and the high bride-price.
With small town reticence, none of them
wants to guess who made you a mother at fourteen.
Maybe one of those Chinese laborers, they say,
vague, while I think of your round-eyed doll
and some Protestant son of the town
laying you down in the fields beyond the tracks:
wild oats and tarweed, and you, slit like a poppy
for the white milk of oblivion.

Old woman, small welcome waits in your hometown.
The shacks beside the tracks are down,
burned out in the Thirties by righteous citizens.
Even the bones are gone. Exhumed.
Silk-wrapped and shipped across an ocean.
But come at twilight, Jennie.
Close your eyes.
The tarweed and the creosoted tracks
still yield their resins.
The engine surges through the darkness
with the same night cry.

for Sue Waldron

The First Wife

No picture survives
of the first, used-up wife.
So I search for her face
in his face, thinking how spouses
come to a common look
after years of grooming in the mirror
of the other's eyes.

In his picture, taken a year
after she died, I see the woman
that survives in him.
Above the neat whiskers,
he stares round-eyed, astonished
at the accidents of life,
by waste and early death.
That's the innocence she left,
dying wiser for the blood on her thighs.

The Tree of Life
is the wedding quilt
sewed for her by her female kin.
Each patch a red letter spelling out
what her mother thought
a wife should know.
She carried it from Ohio,
on the ship, and overland at Panama,
then by mule to Oregon.
Red and white, at night it kept her warm.
Hid her as she opened to him.
Its colors seeped into her dreams:
frost on roses, snow after butchering.

Under the red Tree of Life,
she conceived, delivered, died.
The blood occasions of her life.
Remembered when the quilt

*

is brought out of the chest
and passed, daughter to daughter,
like a curse, or a blessing
from Eve, the first first wife,
whose legacy is pain in birth.
Experience.

For Leslie Egger-Gould

Baker's Man

Once a year they made the trip
to Baker for supplies.
The year the baby died, he went alone,
and somewhere — it was two days there
and two days back — the kerosene
overturned in the wagon
and soaked the flour sacks.

After her first cry,
she never said a word.
If the reek of kerosene obscured
the wine of ferment
she'd once breathed at her board,
he never heard. Her silence
he accepted as simple justice,
and for a long year,
they chewed a bitter crust.

Pioneers of the familiar.
I've worked that bread myself.
Fisted that white flesh,
Punched it down.
Served it up in silence.
Ah, what a stink it has:
the bread of righteousness.

for Bryce Johnson

Dove Season

We walk an old road
overgrown with dove weed.
The resinous scent
recalls you to dove season
in West Texas,
those brief weeks that eased
September's sting.

All you saved in summer
you spent on shotgun shells.
The things you killed.
You list with a laugh
the quarry of your hunting days.
Now you say:
Not much meat on a dove.

How did winged peace
come to rest in your heart,
a brooding warmth?

You point out doves ahead,
feeding on the dark seeds
of the bitter weed.
At our approach, the birds rise,
unafraid, and light again,
a little down the road.

Brother and Sister

Their tale ended all our bedroom battles:
the boy who put his sister's eyes out
with a pillow.

We imagined them twins, laid side by side
on the bedtick, crying into each other's mouths,
chafed by the rough fabric: twill,
woven with two threads, weft crossing warp
to effect parallel lines slanting out of sight.

We knew the weapon: that drab pillow
stained by dreaming mouths. We knew
the scratch of feathers stuck in ticking,
and the exuberance that made them dance
on the straw mattress, tickling and pulling,
striking each other silly with soft blows.

We imagined them after: him in overalls, in ticking,
still that convict cloth, the endless stripe,
hard to tear, to wear out.
Brute among the beasts, he bludgeoned the birds:
the cocks, the geese, the grey hens,
swans when he could snare them.

He laid them in her lap
as she sat sightless in the dooryard.
Her white fingers dove into the down.
Under the pins and quills she found
the hidden warmth and snatched it up.
Stuffed it in that rippled sack
held between her knees.

On those pillows in the dark
they dreamt the beat of rising wings,
the mated flight of wood ducks
lifting from the lake,
their silent merger with the twilight.

Agate Hunters at Land's End

At Newport
we walk with the light before us.
poking the detritus with a salt-eaten stick,
quick as the birds at the tide's edge,
never wetting our feet.
Turnstones. Sanderlings.

At home with the scavengers.
the ghost shrimp and the kelp fleas,
we probe the glistening gravel
for what feeds us:
dendrite and carnelian,
the moss agate's ferny heart.

The eye quickens to the work.
Sees what it hopes to see:
the glimmer of our gold,
tide-rolled in the gravel bar.
that vast arrastra.
Polished for pockets
so weighted with rocks
our drowning would look deliberate.

Hard on the horizon,
the sun goes out gold-white.
Sea and sky streak
like banded agate.
We search in that last light,
the last light of the last day,
for the stones to take home,
stones that admit light.

Gold Beach

I.

Here, where the ocean enters
the mouth of the Rogue,
my Cascade boulders, the bright nodules
from the veins of my mountain valleys,
the cherts and chalcedonies,
the flood of offerings
from my inland streams,
are pounded to rubble, to cobbles,
to this wet gravel,
where red jasper gleams
like drops of blood.

II.

At dawn we walk the tide-line
hand-in-hand. Dried foam
lies on the sand like a lace-edged sheet
turned back on a great bed
flecked with wetness and detritus.
Red laver. Empty shells.
The rubbery bulbs of bull kelp.
Sargassum like a dropped bouquet.
For all the world like the wake of love.
That tidal wake.

III.

We walk home at dusk through dune grass
parted and plaited by the wind.
We shelter in the doorway
of the darkened house,
watching one light travel the water,
pulled slowly north.

for Ron Kramer

Siletz Meditation

The mansions on the spit
and the mansions in the water merge
like chromosomes unable to divide.
houses on the sand, black and flat,
a backdrop of abandonment
for a play with no cast.

Crouched in the arrow grass
with binoculars.
I am the audience.
And this is the center:
a heron, like a Zen adept,
balances on one stilt
in the tide flat,
and stares, hour after hour,
at its own long reflection
in the water.

Or, white vampire, does it see,
through its own image,
the mirrored sky and the sun underwater?

Angel of Death, bad promise.
it canopy-feeds with wings outstretched
in fearful symmetry.
white-robed nun waiting with iron rule
for the child who can no longer be still.
For what moves is doomed.
And beneath its trance
paralysis spreads like a poison
in the water, white and bitter.
The crab forgets its legs.
The sculpin does not breathe.

Silence presses down like a glass.
The salt marsh is a clear saline drop
between slide and coverslip,
lit from below.

I see, as through a microscope,
as in fever, small things grow larger.
The Zen archer shoots.
The arrow-bill finds its mark.
The neck snakes back
as if it had not moved.
As if death is an illusion.

But that beak scissors my heart.
For I see the world to come:
white angels guard an endless afternoon.
sky mirrors water,
nothing stirs.

Hartstein Island

Barnacles on a drifting branch.
Dead wood blossoms
with the sea's white flowers.

Widow

After an April rain he'd take me
to hunt for morels in the woods.
Now he's dead I can't go alone
for fear I'd lose myself.

Rain brings them up.
And when spring rains
swell the house
so doors won't close tight.
I like awake at night
and remember the damp places,
the brown heads nosing out of humus,
rising on their fat stems, holding aloft
their wrinkled brains.
I cradled them in my hands.
Rare food.

Or were they wrinkled stillbirths,
macerated, leather-brown,
shrivelled womb-fruit
with no life of their own?
They tasted of dark places.
Of the earth.
Now I wonder that I took them
in my mouth.

April nights, dawn seems uncertain.
Sleepless, I wonder if the sun failed
whether they'd live on in the cold world,
steadied by a thousand ties,
connected underground,
pressing thready feelers through the mold,
splitting the dead cells open.
Waiting forever to rise, to live again.

Ukrainians

In Chiloquin, displaced.
she made Pysanky eggs.
Painted crosses and wheat sheaves
in wax resist, invisible and negative.
Dyed them red and black.

No Faberge. she lived
on scrambled eggs, meringues, souffles,
on yolk and white coaxed
from the shell with gentle lips.
Blown eggs. Hollow.
Waiting to be sold.
the ovals hung in her windows,
empty as Christ's tomb.

Her new life:
every morning Easter.
Egg money, woman's gold,
brooded in her jar.

Until her old husband
got into her house
and in a rage of breaking
crushed her eggs.
Ten thousand painted tesserae
mosaic beneath his feet.
Bright and Byzantine.

Siskiyou Winter

The bed is cold. We wake worn
from the night-long search for warmth.
Day after day, clouds hide the mountain.
Bushes huddle under the snow like animals.
The tree limbs wear casts of ice.
The pipes are white with bandages.
Grass cracks beneath our feet.
Our breath floats away like spirits.

The wind knows each crack in the house,
flows through the rooms like a river.
We stuff an old nightgown
between the threshold and the door.
In the cold kitchen, we leave the faucet open,
a slow trickle to keep the pipes from freezing.
All day it drips in the sink,
an irregular heartbeat.

Each night we take the poker
and stroke to life the coals
in the belly of the stove,
and on the ashen bed we lay
madrone and oak, slow-burning wood
cut in the heart of summer.
We shut the black door tight,
and hope it will hold fire.

for George Kramer and Joyce Van Anne

Ghost Rock

You point them out in the road cut:
xenoliths.
Unmelted older rock
cemented in new flow.
Black shadows.
Ghost rocks, you call them.
though *xenos* means both
stranger and guest.

Here in the Siskiyou
even the young rocks
have ghosts: the white husks
of ancient mollusks. *Trigonia*.
Twenty million years dead.
Exposed by blasts and graders,
by bulldozers, the white shells
scar the raw face.

The Shasta knew a spirit rock moved
from its place brought rain. Or worse.
They knew the weight of rock.
Gave that weight to acts.
So one seeking wisdom
climbed to this ridge and gathered stone.
Built a cairn to call power,
and sat. Listening.

Here we build our cairn
of one rock cracked apart by frost
into a hundred heart-sized spalls.
Nothing cements them but care.
the eye that judges shape and weight,
the light hand fitting face to face.
We sit beside it.
Wait.

The work is the wisdom we carry away.
The remembered weight of stone.
The delight of balancing.
Wisdom is in eyes, and in hands.
Sheltered by walls of granite.
we descend, our shapes
moving over the rocks like hawk-shadows,
a short interruption of sun.

Coming down, we pass the ghost rocks.
Touch them for luck. For blessing.
Xenos.
Strangers learning to be guests.

Nan Hannon was born in Eugene, Oregon and has lived in Oregon all of her life. She is a graduate of Sacred Heart Academy in Salem and Lewis and Clark College in Portland, where she studied writing with Vern Rutsala. She holds a master's degree in social science from Southern Oregon State College. Since 1984, she has been the curator of the Southern Oregon Historical Society's Swedenburg Cultural Resource Center in Ashland. She has two daughters, Rachel and Anne.

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Donald Schenker, *Up Here*
Richard Speakes, *Hannah's Travel*
Genevieve Taggard, *To the Natural World*
*Marnie Walsh, *A Taste of the Knife*
Bill Witherup, *Men at Work*
*Carolyn Wright, *Stealing the Children*

Women Poets of the West: An Anthology. 1850-1950

*Selections from these volumes, read by their authors, are available on
The Ahsakta Cassette Sampler.