

# Poetry from the West Coast

Selected by

Lorrie Goldensohn, Guest Editor

Over sixty, the decades shrink and the memory lengthens, stretching from earliest childhood to the oppressive familiarity of hospitals and graveyards. But over sixty the contours of feeling and relation also expand, and what may be covered travels widely. It was very much my pleasure to read for this West Coast poetry section of *Persimmon Tree*—reading the poems of women who were plus sixty as well as into their nineties, all living with intensity, and with power and resilience, noting the life in themselves and the people, objects, and places around them.

The pour here is various: many lights, tones, accents, and much complexity of finish. I particularly admired the formal inventiveness and elegance of Judith Montgomery, and thought her poems in their fusion of pain, terror, obscenity, and beauty very much deserved the prize at my disposal. Anne Barrows' "At Island Lake" invents a language that preserves dark comedy while it also soars into more elegiac regions, while Marcia Falk's "Sun-Drenched Barn" gives us a sophisticated meditation on the intersection of material and invented reality. Muriel Karr effectively explores a blunter, more vernacular range, and echoes a consistent preoccupation of many: the heavy weight that our parents lay across the shaping of our lives. There is a seductive playfulness in Ellen Bass's "Ode to my Body on Leaving Sixty," and in Dorothy Gilbert's fruity "Riddle," which appropriately concludes the selection of poetry for a journal named *Persimmon Tree*. The poems of Bass and Gilbert nicely counter-balance the onset of darker emotions saturating the two hospital poems by Gail Rudd Entrekin and Sally Allen McNall. Entrekin's "Recovery Room" does not allow its grim experience to occlude a radiant tenderness, while Sally Ann McNall confronts with wry courage the bitterness inherent in the fragility of our bodies and the often dismaying inadequacy of the places in which we put them for cure. Cooper Gallegos' poem "Cornstalks and Crows" beautifully poses a startling, vividly fatal moment. I follow editorial custom by adding a poem of my own.

Regretfully, because I didn't quite see the room to fit their poems into the emerging conversation of this issue, I put aside pieces by Ann Reh, with its redolent place and childhood memory, and was also caught and held by Carol Ellis' "Fir," a marvelous time-lapse photograph of northwest logging.

Finally, though I was very much pleased by the richness of sensibility displayed, it was gratifying to discover so much of "the fury and the mire of human veins" and to see that the touch was still so hot.

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Ellen Bass Photo, and Title: Ellen Bass

### **Ode to My Body On Leaving Sixty**

Like animals who prowl backyards and alleys,  
raccoons and possums with yellow incisors.  
Even when I shine the torch in their eyes,  
they hold their purchase on the splintered fence.  
They feed on compost and tulip bulbs  
and the blue bowl of stars  
my neighbor leaves out for her cat.  
Like you, my body, you scruffy hobo, trekker,  
refugee crossing burnt fields, dropping possessions piece by piece,  
silver candlesticks, suitcase of dreams, lacey certainties.  
After all these years, still greedy, gulping the salt damp night  
and soaking up the glamour of the old constellations.  
You aren't searching for the soul. Or an end to suffering  
for sentient beings. You're stoking the furnace,  
throwing more coal on the fire. While I sleep  
you bind my kneecap into the socket.  
You stitch the torn fibers, direct the rivers of blood,  
so that this morning, I'm walking again  
and can almost make it down the stairs.

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Gail Rudd Entrekin photo, title: Gail Rudd Entrekin

### **Recovery Room**

A cheerful nurse has come for me  
to say that you are waking  
and she leads me through the swinging door  
into a room with three cream-colored mummies  
lined up on their cots, and the farthest one,  
unquestionably, is you, my bony balding  
silver-bearded angel, just returning  
from your flight, your dream sleep  
someplace where no tubes and wires  
pin you to this world,  
no machines swallow you up,  
take pictures of your organs,  
find out things about you

that you don' know yourself,  
no men cut and paste and fail  
to tell you what they know,  
and we, so desperately, need  
to know.

The blue of your eyes  
is the only color in the face of your absence,  
and for a long time you drift in and out  
so it's hard to know when you are here.  
But now you part your dry lips, search  
for your voice, and ask again, *What did he say?*  
I tell you again, unfazed by this repetition,  
not so different from our daily forgettings,  
or systems of gentle reminders, learning  
to set aside our pride, our touchiness,  
to laugh because sorrow is so wearing.

I take your long cold hand in my two  
warm ones as I have taken you again  
and again into my heat, and I tell you,  
*We don't know.*  
*We have to wait and see.*

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Anne Barrows photo, title: Anne Barrows

### **At Island Lake**

feathering the oars—their flat sides up  
water slipping back—into the water—  
the rough cry of brass locks  
set neat as earrings in the varnished wood—  
a loon's glass-cold half-human voice

my mother  
calling  
back to it

those two alone in the cool wrap  
of evening—this blue that she prefers—  
feral, childish, near radiant, their voices

echoing under the newly risen moon  
converging farther and farther from shore

that dialect—  
the loon's long  
silhouette

my mother caught between her nature  
and her obligation—leans into the song  
as if into the red and gold of temple bells—  
as if she might not be required  
to come back to us—who would have died

to know her  
loon life—  
to be her  
loon darlings

### **Snapshot of a Naked Child**

in a garden. Or wilderness.

Her face hidden by her hair.

The rough grass under her.

She is nine. Or ten.

The dimensions of the photograph are one  
and three fourths by two and three fourths.  
So. Cut down from something larger.  
To fit into a wallet.

The wallet of my former husband.

Which was stolen when he was in Florence with his new wife.

The money had been removed but not the photograph  
when it was returned a year later.

Ten years before he died.

Then the picture, freed from its pocket, lay among others  
spread on the dining room table.

Unidentified.

Until I saw myself between the dark wood and the light.

Summer, 1945. The two bombs have already been dropped. Soon everyone will see the picture of the child whose clothes have been burned from her body. Naked and screaming, she runs towards the camera.

My father has returned from the war, but can't yet bring himself to look at our faces—upward turned to his.

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Judith Montgomery photo, title: Judith Montgomery

(Note: Judith Montgomery was selected by the guest editor to receive the monetary award for the *Persimmon Tree* West Coast Poets Contest.)

### **Her Silence Is**

A thin robe, seamless tissue-  
of-silver wrapped about her limbs.

Endless linen wound to cripple  
her toes, binding ever closer

the voices of her feet. Her hair  
bound in a snood of woven gold.

(Is consequence. Statement. Custom.)

Her hips' swash constricted  
by panniers' brocade. Floating

rib removed, the more closely  
to corset her waist. Breath.

(Handcuff. Straitjacket. Gag.)

Her stiletto heel. Hobble-skirt. Chador  
muting verb and adverb of her stride.

Both bandage and wound. Glitter  
and mesh that nets her tongue.

(Calling. Witness. Refusal.)

Clitoridectomy: cancel  
cancel the throat of her moan.

(Shame. Cinch. Crib.) Is

fear: of what she might say,  
were she free to speak: breaking

forth from ankle, ear, hair, cheek,  
rib hand hip lip lips--

from tongue tongue  
her unbridled tongue.

### **Hostage Clock**

When she is seized, her captors erase  
the watch on her wrist to handless blur:  
there is no tense to talk about this face.

Silenced. Bound. Tracks wiped of all trace.  
Shut up in stone and gag, she's twice immured,  
seized out of time her captors erase.

Her family weeps at home, a flood-lit place,  
and prays for *are* and *will*, but waits on *were*:  
they have no tense to talk about her face.

Above the ticking town, mortars' blaze  
times this shortest night. The deadline stirs.  
Seized by their cause, her captors erase

morning to etch mourning on that gaze  
they'd cut off from a future they abjure.  
I have no tense to talk about this face

that floats on midnight screens in bruise and haze.  
Pray for raid or mercy to deter  
fate. When she was seized, her captors erased  
*safe*. Look—*don't look*—too closely at this face.

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Sally Ann McNall photo, and title: Sally Ann McNall

### **Escape from the Hospital**

You have to suppose it happens a lot:  
thw skinny girl with bald patches where  
she pulls out one hair at a time slides out  
the front door, the old man finds  
his smeared eyeglasses and coat  
and takes the elevator to the parking lot.

In movies, all the time, someone does it  
to escape a killer, or establish his basic  
bare-ass silliness. Yet in real life  
it's seldom more interesting  
than someone saying *Enough*,  
whether or not others are on board  
with the decision. A mother picks up  
her weeping boy, a man pulls the IV  
from his wife's blackened arm, alarms  
go off, the doctor is paged, the man  
goes on batting the nurses off and detaching  
the monitors, they make it down  
the gleaming hall and the stairs--another  
alarm going off--out into the hot morning,  
to the car. There are of course consequences.

The most ordinary is death, what my friend  
spoke of this morning as "a good death," maybe.  
Lawyers may come into it. Especially in the case of  
psychiatric diagnoses, pursuit and capture, i.e.,  
the police get involved. But none of this is the point:

we can't all be thinking *How complicated, how impossible*,  
or we would all be lying flat somewhere enduring  
the indignity and the fear that washes through us  
during nights of rudely-broken sleep and the unrelenting  
company of strangers, we would all be citizens of nothing  
with no plans and nowhere to go.

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Muriel Karr photo, and title: Muriel Karr

**If You Want to Smell Your Father**

if you want to smell your father,  
brush him with your newest eyelash;

if you want to drop your father  
into the swerving breath of fire,  
then you have to pull him on your back  
to the edge  
where the little scales  
scrape at you

and if you want to cross over  
then you have to be willing  
to collide with a giant

who blows your heart out of you

and you have to pick it up blindly  
on your knees  
year after year  
and you have to eat it

remembering his cigarbands on the porch  
when he would turn to you  
with his can of beer and say

here—take a sip of this

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Photo Marcia Falk, and title: Marcia Falk

**Sun-Drenched Barn**

*After a painting by Wolf Kahn*

It could be anybody's barn  
but it's not. It's the barn she remembers  
in her dreams of summer,

of leaping out of her body and diving

into sun-drenched hay  
with all her young life in place,

herself unaware she is young,  
because what in her life  
could she compare it to—

this ease with which she moves through air,  
her yellow hair flying through speckled light,  
weightless and free as haydust?

It could be anyone's youth, but it's not,  
it's her own, though she cannot recall  
what finally tore her away,

cannot—*will* not—bring to mind  
the tired loves . . . The woman stops.  
It is not hers, this life

she is recording— It could be  
anyone's memory, but it's not  
hers. She has stolen it because she wants

to walk into the painting, dissolve  
into the inviolate surface  
of a finished thing,

leaving behind the mess, the work  
of making sense out of what is given  
and what is swept away,

what is left and what is left behind,  
what is hers to give  
and what is not.

It could be anyone's life  
coming into view, being drawn,  
and drawn away,

even as she begins to be one with it.

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Photo Cooper Gallegos, and title: Cooper Gallegos

**Cornstalks and Crows**

Early in the morning in June  
I walked out of our vacation adobe  
Through a rabbit trail  
Past the escusado  
And stood with the toes of  
My shoes just touching the  
Edge of earth where it began  
To crumble into the corn patch.  
I began to blow into the plastic  
Crow whistle I'd fished out of a  
Kellogg's Cornflake box.  
I took a step back, blew air into the plastic whistle  
My caws stretched over  
the bent tassels and rustled  
in the Green thicket until a crow, like magic,  
Came from no where and landed  
with a great black swoop just above my head  
On the tallest corn plant.  
And listened with glee as the crow answered back  
and in one moment like a quickly descending storm  
the air was black with the birds.  
Blue wings glistening like a giant oil spill  
That blotted out the rising sun  
Until all I could see was black  
And all I could hear was the riot  
Of sound and the crushing of the entire field.

Farmers ran and swooped their flannel arms  
but the crows had taken up residence as though they too  
had sprouted from the earth.  
I moved five steps back and watched as the entire  
Crop was destroyed.

And sometimes even with the power of the heaviest regret  
Things cannot be made right.  
Sometimes the need to create and to destroy are as tightly  
Bound as the weave of feather on wing.

The cloud of crow sometimes unbidden  
But too often hailed by us  
On the intake of breath  
Sometimes we choose disaster.

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Photo Lorrie Goldensohn, and title: Lorrie Goldensohn

### **Interment**

Goodbye, dear friend, you would have  
laughed at us--walking away  
from your burial service, reflecting  
on its unexpected orthodoxy.

Had you been able,  
you would gladly have joined  
our conversations about death,  
cocking your handsome head quizzically,  
pleased at how you made us  
ponder burial versus cremation.

Carried all the way to Burlington,  
you were washed  
and clothed in the ritual way,  
before they dropped you  
into the bulky pine coffin,  
the blue vinyl straps and steel rigging  
suspending all, while the kaddish  
wrapped you for the swift descent  
into the concrete casing  
spread open  
at the feet of your weeping daughters.

And then the first shovelful, thwuck:  
each subsequent thwuck,  
as in the sweating heat  
only the resolute  
took up the yellow dirt  
and let it tumble on the resonant lid  
covering the drying, invisible you.  
Our early summer flower, our  
corpse-in-the-box. Lying there,

let us think, in what position?  
An edible waiting to crumble  
beneath a boil of insects, until  
it is brought to the emptied bone--

Listen: under a blanket of ground,  
I feel my body go tight, then loose,  
in the slow mangle of decay....

and think I would rather burn:  
handfuls of bone chip and ash dust  
flung into the chosen pond,  
water taking the lot,  
a gone self in bits  
glittering and sinking.  
For a little while, the job  
of memory given to others to hold.

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Photo Dorothy Gilbert, and title: Dorothy Gilbert

### **Riddle**

I am breast-shaped, brilliant,  
but in youth, bitter.  
I ripen, though. More and more  
translucent glows my flesh; my color deepens,  
I'm a lantern. My breast milk  
slowly sweetens.

Maybe you've seen  
my home when the deep orange leaves—my shape, my color,  
me two-dimensional—camouflage me. Or later,  
in a field, the black bare skeleton bearing  
my little flames, ignited by the sun.

When I'm ready  
there's no bitterness, only richness  
for your mouth. Pluck my strings, praise me,  
taste me.