

FIREWEED

Poetry of Western Oregon



Volume Five, Number Four
July 1994 \$2.50



FIREWEED: POETRY OF WESTERN OREGON is published quarterly in October, January, April and July. *FIREWEED* publishes poets living in the western half of Oregon, though poems need not be regional in subject. Manuscripts should include a return envelope with sufficient postage. We also need a biographical note. Inquiries about submission of reviews or essays are welcome. Subscriptions are \$10 for four issues. Please notify us if your copy of the magazine arrives damaged, so we can replace it. All contents are copyrighted 1994 by *FIREWEED* 1330 E. 25th Ave., Eugene, OR 97403.

Recipient, Oregon Institute of
Literary Arts Publishers Award

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EDITORS' NOTES

This issue marks our twentieth magazine and five years of continuous publication. *FIREWEED* seems to be established, and if it is not towering and spreading like its namesake, at least it is solidly rooted. Thanks to subscribers, especially those who signed on in October 1989 and have stayed with us these five years. Thanks to writers, as well, who have continued to send work we believe deserves readers. Our fifth anniversary wish is that you all come to our September Potluck and Reading. And that you keep contributing to the magazine!

This year our Potluck and Reading will occur on Saturday, Sept. 24th, noon, at Bellfountain County Park. Bellfountain is a small community about 3 miles west of Hwy 99W, near Monroe. Coming south from Corvallis or north from Eugene on 99W, go west on Dawson Rd. (which takes off from 99W about 3 miles north of Monroe). Follow the signs through Bellfountain, one more mile west on Dawson, to the only hilltop park you can see. Please bring service for yourselves, a dish to feed four hungry people, and poems! We'll supply non-alcoholic beverages. See you there!

Permission to publish Tom Crawford's poem "Salmon" was granted to *FIREWEED* by the author and by Cedar House Press, Seattle. Don Nickerson graciously allowed us to publish his warm letter about William Stafford in our TESTIMONY column (originally he did not intend it for publication).

Then I would see him bicycling up Boone's Ferry Road, an old bike with balloon tires. And what a hill it was from where he lived up to the college... long, hard and slow. But I guess he liked it that way. Time to think. Closer to life, as he went, than the car.

Then there was how he had his camera draped over his neck or arm, flipping it up to take pictures of most anybody at any time, often unexpected. Like he was saying, "Here, let me disappear for a minute behind this camera, and let's make you the focus of attention right now." People in the public eye often want to disappear, but rarely do they disappear in order to focus the attention and their energy on the others who cross their paths. So I liked how gadabout he was with his camera. You would see his face less, it was a blur as he moved from here to there, to crouch, or bend, stand to take his pictures.

Thanks for letting me share a few photographs of my own taken through the years.

Sincerely,

Don Nickerson



Lois Baker

THE COVERT

Look for a block of snow,
sedge thicket, rocky outcrop.

Or make a blind of rip-stop nylon
disguised as the glare on water.

Be deliberate, slow. Don't move
till crows ignore you,

the marsh puts up
with your stillness.

Approach by kayak. Circumvent rushes,
the rackety winter cattails.

Wait till you focus clearly
on that grebe now swimming by you,

wait for the curling wave it sends
to level. Now release the shutter.

You may have caught the gold-ringed eye
that knew you all along, the open bill

and black-crowned head as they submerge. But not
the keening cry, or fog rising to hide you.

Lois Baker

BORDER CITIES

Your dunce who can't do his sums
always has a taste for the infinite.

George Eliot, *FELIX HOLT THE RADICAL*

They take root where night falls
before hill shade touches.
Their rivers run northeast,
turn with the moon.

They have a sign: a well,
or fissures that bleed steam.
They tilt away from wind.
Their birds nudge the chapel clock.

Their maps name you as center.
The corners cut your finger. You find
the sum of the square of distance,
the unlearnable edge of the world.

THRIFT

Jaako, a cousin of the Finn next door,
chopped wood for food and a quarter an hour.
He loped to our alley drive one day with ax and maul,
Mother waiting by a cord of fir,

just enough for the winter cookstove.
Neither understood what the other said,
yet they seemed like kin: Jaako, hatchet-thin,
never looked as far as tomorrow;

Mother, trusting luck, gave away
our garden bounty: apples, quinces, pears
we couldn't use up in a day. No Mason jars
on the cellar shelves, no wax-topped jam or jelly.

All afternoon the even peal of chopping.
By five, wood stacked against the shed
fit close as brick, the kindling pencil-fine.
Then a thick beef stew.

I watched from the pantry door. Three helpings
piled on Jaako's plate, half a loaf of bread for gravy,
half a glass of my father's rye. He left with a wave
and a silver dollar.

I got wood for our supper fire.
Just enough moon to see leaves whirling,
the Canada geese fly south, their double-syllabled cry
both goodbye and greeting.

REVIEW: *TRACERS* by Lois Baker (Howlet Press, 1992)

I can't think of a better description of Lois Baker's elegant writing than one given, indirectly, by her publisher in an interview in the January 1994 issue of *FIREWEED*. Describing the kind of work she chooses to publish, Doris Avshalomov said, "...I lean toward the lyric, and I like intelligence in poetry." Fans of experimental or confessional poetry or, as Avshalomov mentioned, "poems that contain outrageous language or lots of body parts and functions," will probably fall asleep to the painterly motions of these poems. But those who like deep detail, a well-told story, graceful and muscled language, and, yes, intelligence, will find *TRACERS* a pleasure.

Baker, who lives in Portland, taught English in China, and the first section of the book, "From Harbin," tells stories from that time. Her sense of detail is stunning, as in the first stanza of "Suzhou Oranges":

I put off going back til the sun
reaches Iron Mountain and rice chaff blows
along the cobblestones. Hung with two days' washing,
barges string out on the Grand Canal; their charcoal
stoves are lighted, and a scent of onion
takes the sting from November mist.

My favorite from these China poems is a mysterious, menacing wander called "Desert." The story, as I read it, is that the narrator's plane has been grounded because of a fierce dust storm, and she has decided, instead of waiting passively, to walk out into the nearby dunes. Her driver translates a warning, "Takla Makan/ means *Go in and you won't come out.*" He naps in the back seat, such a relaxed gesture in contrast to her bold/foolish step beyond the gravel road to where "the sky's jade-hard." Then "a light wind crumbles/ the edge of a crescent dune; it rings/ like a just touched harp," and she remembers all the stories she's been told about this place. She builds them one on another, like the building wind and sand, until we're both frightened for her and fascinated:

I've been told how the fine sand
of the *buran* blinds camels, chokes horses,
how it has buried a thousand cities.
How mountain rivers lose themselves
in this desert. How, if you fall behind,
there may be caravan bells from the wrong direction

or the sinister bark of foxes at tainted oases.
How, when you've finally forgotten
to breathe or watch or listen, are finally lost,
you hear from that tamarisk just at your side
your name, then *Come this way*,
and always in your voice.

There's good-hearted humor in this book, as well. In "Mrs. Strathclyde Falls in Arch Cape Creek," an old, blind elk charges and Mrs. S. topples in. Daughter Lou Ella "goes for the rusted/ thirty-ought-six & Mrs. Strathclyde,/ almost at shore, lets her legs drift open,/ first time in twenty years...." Later, the elk munches compost outside the bedroom while Mrs S. drinks hot rum in the kitchen "...and steam/ from the kettle pushes clear green rivers/ down the window pane."

I got out a dictionary to look up the word "tracers," and it is a beauty. It indicates searching out and copying designs and patterns or marking the trail or path of a process. The title poem translates this into writing light onto the dark and making one's own light in the dark.

The narrator is in Venice for the feast of the Redentore-- the Redeemer, a perfect metaphor for this theme. All around her are vendors selling fluorescent crowns. "The sultry air preserves their glow/ as if it were a text." The crowds are waiting for the lighting of candles and a night of fireworks.

The scene takes the narrator back to her childhood, and through this connection, the memory and her life as she's chosen to live it are illuminated and honored:

In our ball park one Fourth of July
I wrote out my name with a sparkler
before the first stroke vanished. A great
chrysanthemum bloomed just as the rainstorm broke.

Though I went with the crowd to shelter,
I found my own way into dark,
each step joined by new light,
neither moon nor sun shining.

This volume, hand-set in letterpress by Doris Avshalomov, was a finalist for the 1993 Oregon Book Award. It's easy to see why. My personal criteria for a good book of poetry might be pared down to a list as thin as this: real content; attentive form; appealing presentation. Baker provides the first two, which is plenty to ask. Avshalomov provides the third ingredient. The letterpress work makes you want to run your hands over every page. In addition to fine internal imagery and craft, each poem also has dimension, body, given to it by the physicality of this painstaking process. That's a joy in a mass-market world. It's also another tracer-- the letterpress work honors the writing process by mimicking its careful setting down, letter by letter, of meaning and sound and life.

Jackie Melvin

Paul Keller

THE HOMESTEAD
UP BABER MOUNTAIN

Years of wild ginger
masquerade all that's left,
the collapsed foundation
taken by ants.
And over in the shadow
of that grandfather fir,
someone has poked out
the eyes of the Ford
with a stick. Here
thimbleberry roots
where the old motor
connected, rusting
the color of blood.
Near the spring, beside
new wood violets, I find
a platform of boards white
with age, brittle, where he
came for water before they
clearcut the ridge.
A single clothesline post
tombstones the other side
of this meadow,
where his legacy is charted
by a collection of cans,
each wrapped in tendrils of fern,
and bottles and bedsprings
half forgotten in sod,
where he left his own
bones without telling us.

COYOTE SONG

It leaps through the branches like fire
and remembers a language of stars
when fish told their stories to sea
then carried their bodies back
to dream here again beneath trees.

But your prayer, again tonight, is not answered.

And where you taste my smell and my smoke
in your breathing
in moon
in this same meadow
where your ancestors returned
to remember their lives,

we have taken your trees
to build a small house, here
where the earth still swells with seeds
and the wind now holds sounds of river
and cars.

I do not hear your feet,
swollen from the long journey
through the secrets of old mountains,
return to hunt me from my dreams,

as you lift that grey hood
for the sound of the stars
and your scream
finds only satellites
falling up into sky,

that's when those hard eyes
beneath your dark robe
move up through the cedar
and take all my bones
into your mouth
into your wise laughter.

Victoria Wyttenberg

LICHEN

When my friend, Jackie, and I hiked to a waterfall
we talked of the flying squirrel who seldom
comes to the ground. She showed me
shiny gold insects waiting in branches,
frog spittle clinging to leaves,
translucent spider eggs like tears
under dogwood. I asked, where are the bats
hanging upside down, holding on to themselves,
snakes, glittering scales coiled, waiting?

I know mice startle at the owl's call,
the hare freezes at the sight of a fox.
I know mud and drizzle, blow your house
down, black ants, their pincers.
We step over stones, bronzed edges
of water, a shadow on the pool
like bread thrown.

Jackie is not stupid. She knows physics,
the positions of stars, the sky, its black holes,
all the insects in the forest.
She knows about loss, but she believes
in heaven, all those angels, perfect skin, halos,
and someone listening when she prays.

Abandoned by husband, then lover, Jackie has found
the Church, she tells me. The priest said, "to God
you are luminous and fragrant." I am in love
with Jesus, she says. We talk of Judas,
his kiss. She shows me lichen,
the oldest thing on earth, pale, mottled
and bumpy, like pieces of the moon.

PRAISE

In February the sound of the rain outlives
my mother time after time, her telling
how she hated the month her mother
died, my father went to war
and I was born. Year after year, she said, this month
ends abruptly, comes up short, gives days both brief
and cold, its only blessing snow, blue shadows.

Nervous as the month, I wonder
who I am. My eyes, the only green take it all in,
wait for nature to repeat itself, the world to fall
into place. From my mother's sac of water
I slipped into dark rain, buds
keeping secrets in hard knots,
and the tears of her weeping.

February is everything
a month shouldn't be. Still I look
for signs. Bare, skinny tree limbs lift against
the grey bowl of sky. Skunk cabbage raises
its head, scenting the air
with onions. This is the month lace bugs
and earthworms wait it out

while squirrels choose mates. Cows stand
brooding and motionless. A sun-loving groundhog
predicts weather with its shadow
and the winter wren tells the future
in little miracles of song. Redwings flash
a Valentine. In this slippery month of roots
and water, a day ends quickly, but moody

like the sea, I feel the pull
of the moon. I am glad for my good bones,
my spine buttoning up my back, lips for kissing
and hair to tangle a lover's sleep.
Wet and watery as a frog, I praise tears
faithful to grief, turn my eyes
toward heaven and the falling rain.

Kerry Paul May

THE SUNDAY HOUSE

This swagger is not young
Robert Mitchum but last night's
Greed for more gin and lime,
More than needed to allow music
To enter through my skin.
Now I horde the dull sunrise
With aspirins and sweet coffee
Until morning mists fade
Into December's blue, if such
December days were marketable.
Why do you do that? my ex
Once asked. I didn't know
At the time. I couldn't tell her.
Now it's the Sunday house
And the fire I managed roars
In the stove, clicking the cold
Black casement into life.
It should be easy to ignore
Compulsion and praise dawn
With an excess of clear thought.
Ah, father, I'm sorry for your habits
That I carry on. I'm sorry
For your death these six long years,
Your gravesite tramped by Late Saints
Who steal your wreaths. I should
Have suspected change to change me.
Your wife and daughter live in my
Town now. Stories run long on humor.
Once we thought you almost here.
I hold very still-- how loud
The branches are this morning,
The flare of matchlight enough
To illuminate my small monastery,
The hand-twitch that moves
The body forward, always forward,
The distance shortening, this swagger
To the kitchen, a practical art.

FATE

(in memory, R.C.)

Tonight I take down the poet's books,
Stack them neatly, and begin from his
Beginning, rewording the reviews I'd
Written, the kindness I'd passed on.
There were negatives, but I let them go.
I, too, know the failure of long nights,
The triumph of a few good hours,
Like putting on slippers and stepping
Out into January then returning inside
To the warmth with an armful
Of perfect split oak. It's April now.
The cherry blossoms in the dentist's
Parking lot drift like snow across
The RESERVED slots. Firewood for my
Schrader stove is diminished to new
Business for the cutters from Creswell
Who park their pickup loads at Safeway--
There, that's it. Simple. How some lives
Cross paths indeterminately, what
The poet would have called, fate--
A dentist, a wood cutter, the blossoms
Doing their thing, the one or two good
Nights when, arms loaded with quarter-cuts,
His lover says, without looking up,
"Did you remember the carport light?"
Then says, "Here, now. Let me handle that."

Jean Esteve

AT GRANDMA'S KNEE

So you want to know
in words what it's been
like, I'll tell you then.
It's been a cross-country trip
in a Greyhound local
that pulls into the mission-kitchen,
pawnshop section sink
of every town in every state
along the way, jolting us upright
out of our sleep or daydreams,
or from the long tale we've just begun
about a nephew's colon operation.

What I know about myself
is the ghost reflection in the dusty window,
pasted there against a pale conundrum
of houses, trees, blurred and changing,
not required to be plain. What matters
is what the driver sees.

Do you understand now why we use
the dark art for its song? The way
it has of making bumpy seats feel snug?
How it magnifies to consequence South Prairie,
Emoryville, Valley Junction, Roseberry, Lincolnsburg?

Linda H. Elegant

ADVICE TO WESTERN WRITERS
a poem for Wallace Stegner

Get over gardens, grass.
Learn to love this empty land,
the ribs of rocks,
the spines of hills,
the dark depths of canyons.
Embrace this earth unadorned,
with no civilizing cover of clothes.
Desire this western earth
stark, bare,
for itself.
Feel no need to change it.
See it plain.
Write it clear.

GUEST POEM

Tom Crawford



For Ray Carver

SALMON

By now
two old fish,
you swim into the gravel bar
under the bridge
Aren't you, like us, looking
for the precise place
Now, where the thistles grow
there was a foundation
a bedroom

It's the oldest story alive
the wind and rain bring
the red leaves down to the creek
down to the water
and we love the falling
the water coming down
all day and night
while we sleep
while we are falling asleep

from *LAUDS* (Cedar House Press, 1993)

COMMENT

Like William Stafford, another transplanted midwesterner, Tom Crawford paid some dues in California then headed for the coastal hills of Oregon. Out there, along the misty ridges and zigzag creeks, he has watched, listened and then written quietly powerful poems. Before I wade into my comments about an obvious favorite, it's important to note that Crawford has been influenced by the deceptive simplicity of Asian poetry. He has taught in China and is now teaching at a Korean university. These Far Eastern episodes are tinting his northwestern voice with a subtle glaze. It is not just what the words say and mean but what they do to you at the exact moment *you* read the poem.

For me, the lines-- "Now, where the thistles grow/ there was a foundation/ a bedroom"-- conjure a sense memory of a lilac bush beside the front door of a 19th century homestead near Alsea. Perhaps a young couple making a go of it up on Salmonberry Creek enjoyed those aromatically purple flowers. Maybe it was a bachelor logger adding a touch of color. All that remained when I wandered by was the house foundation, some junk in a nearby ravine and a lingering, bittersweet historicity summoned by Crawford's lyrical precision.

Appropriately dedicated to Raymond Carver whose work resonated with home truths about real people, "Salmon" masterfully evokes life's passages. In it are a bunch of common nouns that would feel uncomfortable at a pyrotechnic slamfest: *gravel bar, creek, leaves, old fish*. Even the grammar is trimmed for a smooth glide against the current of what is yet to be read. No periods, a few capitals sticking up like boulders above whitewater, a rippling comma here and there. And then, much too soon, we're back to where it started-- fins fanning the birthpool, hearts no longer able to move heavy bodies above speckled stones.

The poem's main accomplishment-- the elegiac meld of two endangered yet enduring species-- isn't news, especially to Native Americans who have always believed in the intermingling of our tribes. But it is a timely reminder. Lately, there's been a commotion lamenting the plight of regional salmon. All this last-minute journalistic angst is surely better than collective denial resulting in the loss of another species. But poems like these eighteen sure and steady lines should suffice.

The deep image of the last five lines calls forth sweet memories of lying in a warm bed, listening to hard weather. And, in keeping with the commonality of finned and legged beings consistent throughout the poem, it celebrates a loving embrace of the long peace as well as the struggle upriver.

Dave Johnson

Dave Johnson

BAD NEWS IN LATE APRIL

Upon hearing that Sari has
taken a turn for the worse

The years grow heavier
saturated with the troubling sleep
of anticipated tragedies.
Angels I have known
are making it official,
losing their breakfast
and then their breath.
The agreed-upon fantasy
that we will all live forever
sublimely, together
is attenuated
by this wearisome pace:
one gone
two gone
three gone
four

Joan Dobbie

A WOMAN FALLING

"A family
without a father is like a house
with three walls," the mother
falls out the back, and keeps
falling, the mud
that she slides down
is dark as old blood, and
she keeps grasping at small
green shallow-rooted leaves
pulling them down
with her as she slides, she thinks
she might come to a strong root
a tree root
to hold her, maybe even another
and another, until she's climbed
her way out, but in the reality
of the dream, it doesn't happen
like that, she will slide
down forever, the tiny
blue house growing ever smaller
above her

Kathie Durbin

INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING

Long March night at the Seaview Arms Motel.
Through walls of cheap paneling we hear
the people next door fighting, a child
begging, "Please stop!" You are boiling
spaghetti in a cloud of steam; when I open a window
the wild ocean drowns everything.

A chrome table covered with red linoleum
holds the notebooks we have filled today:
students investigating an execution
on our spring vacation. Our love
is so new I would follow you
anywhere, to this forlorn town
where two brothers, one demon-haunted,
the other a peacemaker, died last month
in a sheriff's ambush. The town mourns;
it is our first lesson

in the uses of vulnerability.
The mother offered tea in her living room
and wept as her husband recited again
the mantra of their grief: Roadblock, helicopters
hovering, a dull premonition as the sheriff
leaned into their pickup: "We had to
take them both, Don." Back at the motel
we can't stop talking, can't help
feeling thrilled to be at the heart
of this horror. Tonight, people from town

came to our door with notes
written out in longhand: dates and places,
tales of violence buried in the long
winters here. A sadistic jailer,
a Vietnam vet who was never
quite right after he came home,
couldn't keep a job, but as for the rape charge
everyone knew those two were lovers.

She swore out a warrant for his arrest
but he refused to go back to the jail
where they'd held him down
and cut his hair, holed up instead
at the family cabin where his brother tried,
that last night, to warn him. We hiked in,
stood near the riverbank where sharpshooters
brought them down. Something worse than fear,
a swift knowledge that violence
is real, froze me at the doorway
of the darkened cabin. Lighting a candle,

eating near midnight as rain lashes motel walls,
we try to get our minds around this place,
this crime, these people and their inexorable
fate. The child next door has quieted,
a television laugh track breaks the silence.
The storm lets up and we stand in the doorway
in a rectangle of yellow light.

Your hair is damp and greasy when you bend
to kiss my neck. The candle burns all night
in its tin ashtray as we lie
together, listening to steady rain.

Douglas Spangle

AUGUST

Section 5.

Athens in August,

'67: we'd been evacuated
from the Middle East

and the Six-Day War; in Kifissia

we lived at the shabby-genteel Hotel Pentelikon.

King Constantine's idle

in exile, off yachting in England

after the Coup;

Colonel Papadopoulos basks in epaulettes.

The Parthenon's crumbling

in sulfured summer calm

and sullen Athenians clot to grumble in Omonoia Square.

On the balcony of the American Club,

munching hot fries,

you feel a false balm on the breeze from Mount Pendell.

Something in the air:

All You Need Is Love.

AUGUST

Section 22.

August, 1970,

Phoenix, Arizona: "Back in the World," as the GIs say;
after four years overseas,

it looks just like LA.

Phoenix is just another freeway town now, gas stations
scab the drag

where jacarandas used to grow.

Camelback Mountain's crusted with townhouses
and landscaped condominiums.

The only frontier's

Sun City now, and real estate scams tract

Monument Valley

and the rimrock country

John Ford once filmed. My brother and I sit
in ice-cold

shopping malls and watch obese
suburban families waddle by like geese.

Douglas Spangle

AUGUST

Section 27.

STILL LIFE: LATTERIA ALLA STAZIONE

Milan, August, 1973

Glass shelves of meats and vegetables,
all silent.

Balding cook and electric fan,
mostly finished glass of Coke,
coffee rings on white formica,
half-burned cigarette,
basket of bread rolls,
hat on a rack,
acqua minerale

uncommenting.

All silent, all asleep
on this moment, this morning.

Diane Averill

CLEAR

When I call your name
you turn to me inside
of a morning surrounded
by desks and sharp voices
and smile as if I'm waking
you out of a night
long in our love cries.

For hours after,
work in the inner
city is light,
clear as river-green leaves;
my voice has predicted a memory
we may never share.

Tom Crawford

BIRD WALK

Old age and freedom
so long in coming
they can hardly stay awake for it
these retired party members
who sometimes doze off in the morning sun
down in Lieschimu
their arms around their caged birds.

I look inside to see what it is they love so much.
This brown headed, solitary bird
with green eye lids,
inimical to ruffled feathers,
seems to know
its company, alone, is enough.
If it moves at all I can't tell,
it's such a fine adjustment in color.
By its gold knuckled toes
it maintains center on a single perch.

Moved by my interest,
the old men always smile to see me coming.
One points to the new door he's added--
a tiny bamboo grove etched in thin bronze.
He is especially happy about the blue-green patina
I trace with my finger.

Each has his own logo
written in Chinese over the entrance.
Blue Cloud Gate on one, Cold Mountain on another.
What's standardized here? That the men all be old.
That the cages look like cages.
And the small doors, whatever their design,
open inward.

GUAN YEN

Fingers missing. Thumbs
smashed. It doesn't matter.
Our Lady won't erase.
She regenerates like delicate leaves
her one thousand slender hands
held open to the broken
who understand the blessing
is in knowing they can ask
if not today then, perhaps tomorrow,
mercy. A miracle would ruin it.
Buddha means to suffer
the rice to grow in China,
the dull kitchen knife
to cut her regularly
is how she knows her saint.
The kite she flies,
O loving Mother,
is attached to nothing-- a blue dress
held by the wind

Note: Guan Yen is the only female
buddha in China and is a powerful
icon to the women of Asia.

REVIEW: *LAUDS* by Tom Crawford (Cedar House Press, 1993)

Tom Crawford has accompanied this magazine from its birth into its fifth year now, and he has often been willing to submit a sample of his latest work. In this issue we present two more poems from his manuscript tentatively entitled *CHINA DANCING*, written during his current sojourn teaching in China and Korea. Crawford, however, is an Oregon poet, and his first three books, *I WANT TO SAY LISTEN* (Ironwood Press/Chapbook Series, 1982), *IF IT WERENT FOR TREES* (Lynx House Press, 1987) and *LAUDS*, certainly entitle him to consideration as a regional poet of some stature. But what is a regional poet in the first place?

Some no doubt are quick to assume that a regional poet is simply a poet residing in a definable geographical area and writing primarily about that area. This is a good enough answer, a generous answer. It's good to be democratic, and there's relief in not exercising standards over writers who may be our contemporaries, even our friends. Sooner or later, however, some poets in Oregon seem to get the celestial nod: in some way they come to be considered more representative of a region than others writing in and about that region.

For many of us the name of William Stafford will come to mind quickly when we think about Oregon poetry. This reviewer and many other readers have felt Stafford to be our major regional poet. Some of us followed him here after he swam to the surface of modern American poetry, back in 1962 when *TRAVELING THROUGH THE DARK* was published. Living in Oregon he wrote powerfully about themes which seem to belong to Oregon. Just take the last poem from that memorable book, its last line: "Your job is to find what the world is trying to be." This is a powerful invocation of the motive many including Stafford have had in emigrating to the area. The line proposes a vocation that fits well the simplicity and freshness of life here.

Tom Crawford perhaps exemplifies another kind of regional poet. His poetry revels in Oregon and in being alive in Oregon. He sings praises-- "lauds"-- of Oregon. He raises up life in the region, which for him, strictly speaking, is the coast and the Coast Range. This is poetry which is very lively, which is full of surprises (some tragic), which endears itself to the reader by its affectionate nature, its loving. It is not poetry which names Oregon in particular very often, but the feel of it somehow defines it as belonging to the spongy earth of western Oregon.

Likely it is the climate of the poems in *LAUDS* which helps produce this feeling. Crawford weather is often wet and windy, with frequent changes of light:

After each storm
isn't there always the quiet interlude
when the heavy sky lifts
and when the last rain forms into slow drops
along the eaves
or drips from the leaves?
We know this place,
this soft light-- the heart opening-- a small room
in the world.

"Trees"

Such an example in a book rich with gratitude lets me point out another impressive feature of Crawford poems. This is a kind of writing which is aptly described as "rising." The word refers to a quality appreciated by Robert Hass in his seminal book of criticism *TWENTIETH CENTURY PLEASURES* (the word "rising" is his).

Commenting on the poetry of James Wright, Hass puts it this way: "[the poet] brings himself and [his readers] and all of us up into the different kind of light that poetry is...." And later, on Tranströmer: "It is this completely rooted and local sense conveyed in a poetry that always wakes stunned from the rooted and the local into a place where the self throbs with itself...."

What Hass is talking about here is transcendence. Speaking historically about the course of modern poetry, he defines one tendency to be poetry making "a music which lifted the traces of objects where they half survived in the referential meaning of words-- street, apple, tree-- toward a place where they lived a little in the eternal stillness of the poem."

It is instructive to compare Stafford and Crawford as transcendental poets. I would like to suggest the notion of an "arc" of transcendence. Poems rise-- as Hass suggests-- but they can also return to the particular, to regional ground. Stafford's poetry rises from the particular, and taking along some regional details (whether of Oregon or Kansas), he transcends in a theological sense, arriving at a strong perception-- and it is there that he pauses and ends a poem, in "eternal stillness." Stafford returns to Oregon, but mainly to start the next poem.

Examples are plentiful throughout Stafford's work. Without quoting at length I will cite two favorites of mine from *TRAVELING THROUGH THE DARK*. The direction of these poems is always upward, towards the visionary, and there is often a final moment of epiphany. In "The Tillamook Burn" we move from "a tongue of flame from sawmill trash" to an awesome vision of a Supreme Being at work: "...trees too dead to fall till He speaks/ Mowing the criss-cross trees and the listening peaks." And in "Late at Night," we climb from the sudden cry of the geese overhead at night into a typical powerful Stafford ending: "We live in a terrible season."

Crawford is doing something a little different, I feel. He seems inclined to lift all the locale of his immediate experience up into the light of poetry. He never leaves the area but takes it all with him. The intention is celebration of living in western Oregon (including hard times), not revelation of meaning in it. Are we talking about the difference between Eastern and Western religions?

Transcendence for Crawford is not the detection of cosmic meaning in his local reality (remember Stafford's sometimes canny look at the end of a poem?) but a kind of simplified intensification of experience: "the self throbs with itself." In the following example the simplicity and precision of the central image strongly suggest the cosmic, the universal, in a surprisingly endearing manner:

The best prayer is small, its eyes closed
In odor it resembles nutmeg

If it can fly at all it's like the blackbird
going out a few feet then back
to the bulrush.

"Prayer"

I love the odor of nutmeg here, the playful note of solemnity in the use of "resembles" and especially the return of prayer to the bulrush-- which really we have never left. This is Crawford in a nutshell.

I'd like to present the entire book, here at the end of this review. Readers deserve it. But I have to settle for a whole poem-- "Cracked Corn," a poem which makes an arc-- and let readers experience it as an example of a kind of very successful regional poetry:

From my front porch in winter
I throw a little cracked corn to the world
Who can beat the sparrows in
all flit and scatter and return
pecking their way around the feet
of the domestics: chickens, ducks and the big bombers
our geese who come rolling up, mostly to bully
There are pleasures in distribution
where the leaves may fall
the assignment of heron to water
beside the house
My love of windows, this habit
of looking out I have, now into cold February
Who can imagine a better life?
The day, quiet, just invented
The start of crocus

D.L.

Laura Winter

going out to get inside

fruit pie floats through all the backyards
plugs up lawn mowers

3 flies
seek the source
and wind up
spinning in circles

orange tabby
crouches and clucks
at a scrub
pecking pears

the lingual flatness of the day
intersects with the heat
of the kitchen
flour dust everywhere

more fruit bombs
explode on the sidewalk
the cat rips the screen
oh get in

Mary K. Bothwell

SEACHANGE

I didn't sleep well last night.
Was there thunder? In the past
our conversations sat
heavy, like an Indian meal,
or too much brandy before bed.
Now, when it is too late
to talk of grief and loss,
we sit, quiet as smoke,
as mist slipping between
the crevices of our fingers
and resting on our hair.

Colin Mahoney

HIGH SCHOOL PARKING LOT\Fall, 1993

The water-logged pavement
complements the trash.
"Exit Real World," they command
in a forest of cigarette butts
and paper leaves.
Music lies bleeding on the asphalt,
abused like a joke,
or a balloon drawn to earth,
past its prime.
Cool Lot's a state of mind
for those who have been
in the oven too long.
"Come out to lunch
and have a cigarette," they'll suggest.
No, my grandpa's probably watching,
though he's been dead for years.

Sara Fischer

AT THE SINK

Peeling at the sink,
the woman looks at her own leathered hands.
Like ovulation at fifty she knows
this hard rainbow turnip
only teases the seasons,
blurring autumn into winter.
She counts her own five hundred chances
as if each one had the same hard possibility.
Soon the last will scrape its way down,
then the fish-hook tug on her insides,
the pull on her sacrum of something
straining against emptiness,
a thought of tenderness, then nothing.
There at the sink-- *if she could only make it new--*
she trades the old black peeler
for a real knife
to cut away that skin mapped with tiny roots.
She finds more pungent leather underneath,
the hint of lavender at its crown.

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

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* first appearance in *FIREWEED*

