

THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST POETRY SERIES

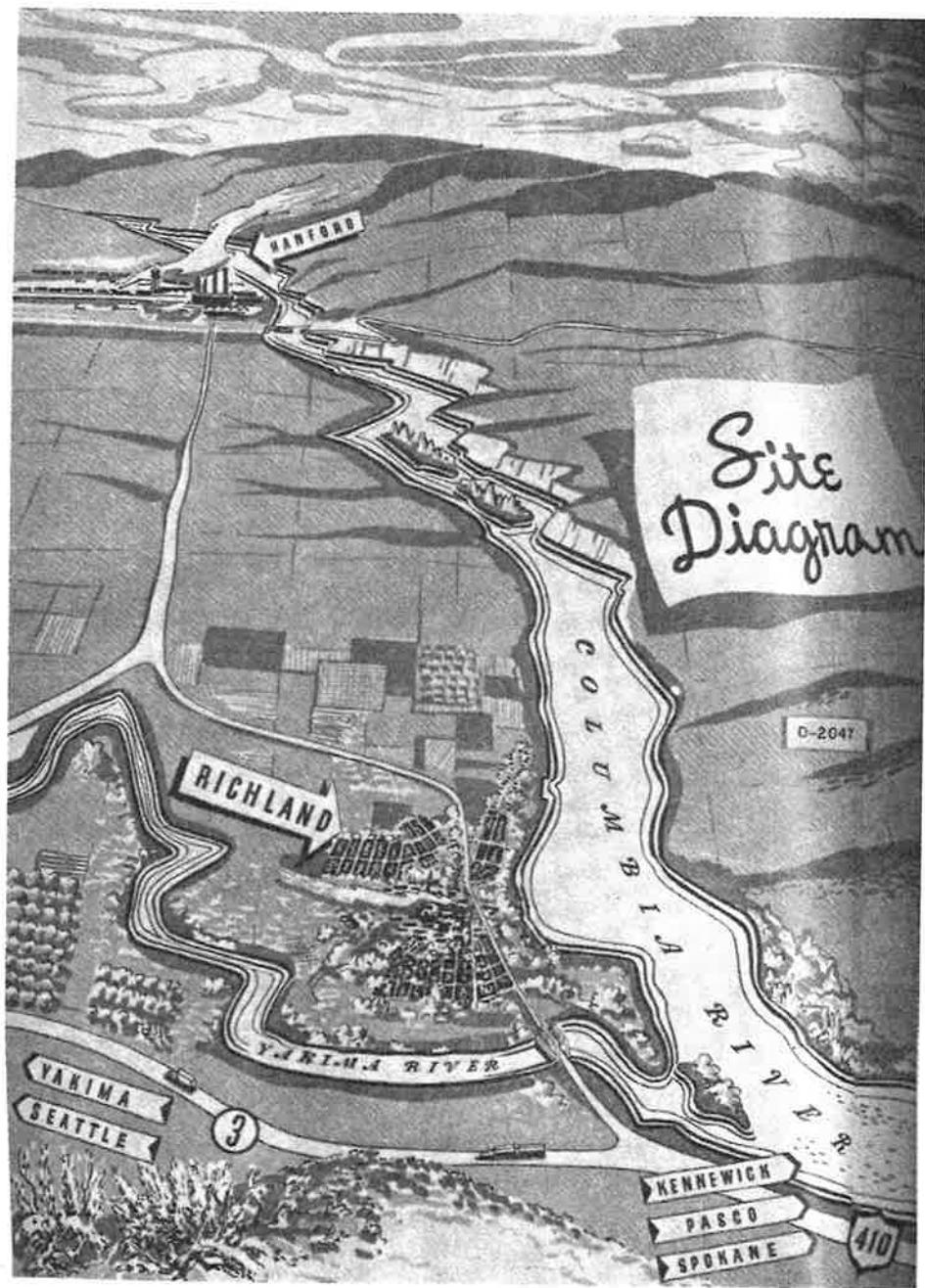
- 2001 John Haines *For the Century's End*
2002 Suzanne Paola *The Lives of the Saints*
2003 David Biespiel *Wild Civility*
2004 Christopher Howell *Light's Ladder*
2005 Katrina Roberts *The Quick*
2006 Bruce Beasley *The Corpse Flower*
2007 Nance Van Winckel *No Starling*
2008 John Witte *Second Nature*
2009 David Biespiel *The Book of Men and Women*
2010 Christopher Howell *Dreamless and Possible*
2011 Katrina Roberts *Underdog*
2012 Kathleen Flenniken *Plume*

POEMS BY

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PLUME



CAMPAIGN Q&A, SOMEWHERE IN OREGON, MAY 18, 2008

WOMAN IN AUDIENCE: *Every year the government promises to fund the Hanford cleanup project in eastern Washington, and every year they find a way to take away the funding, which results in a lot of lost jobs. Washington's current policy seems to be, "The solution to pollution is dilution."*

BARACK OBAMA: *Oh. Nice.*

WOMAN: *What is your policy?*

OBAMA: *Here's something you'll rarely hear from a politician, and that is, I'm not familiar with the Hanford Site. And so I don't know exactly what's going on there. Now, having said that, having said that, I promise you I'll learn about it by the time I leave here on the ride back to the airport.*

MY EARLIEST MEMORY PRESERVED ON FILM

—*John Kennedy at Hanford Nuclear Reservation, September 26, 1963*

Somewhere in that sea of crisp white shirts

I'm sitting on my father's shoulders
as you dedicate our new reactor and praise us

for shaping history. The helicopter that set you down
in our proudest moment
waits camera right, ready to whisk you away.

A half century later, I click play again and again
for proof you approve—
but the nuclear age is complicated.

Are you amazed that eight reactors
mark the bend in our river?
Are you troubled we need a ninth? I can't forget

we'll lose you in a few weeks, that sometime
between then and now
our presidents will forget us.

But today the wind is at your back, like a blessing.

Our long-dead senators applaud
as you touch a uranium-tipped baton to a circuit

and activate a shovel atomically.

This is the future.
Dad holds me up to see it coming.

RATTLESNAKE MOUNTAIN

We claim it's the tallest treeless mountain
in the world, which is only true
if you behold it—

mistress of dust storms, wildfires,
windswept and monochrome—and acknowledge
we live exposed to the planets here,

that the mountain's folds and shadows
roll with stars, soft April greens, and lupine,
belying missile silos hidden in catacombs

and the waste of 50 years of atomic bombs.
Our families all came from elsewhere,
and regarded the desert as empty,

and ugly, which gave us permission
to savage the land. The mountain,
figure in repose, looked on

as we buried what we buried at its hem.
Desert turned vineyard, orchard, strip mall,
houses in every shade of beige.

This radioactive burial ground
and the hills along its edge are the last
unbroken stretch of shrub-steppe remaining.

I left the mountain half my life ago
to live among trees,
and now—an exile—I understand

what beautiful ghost rises up in the distance
in my dreams. Now I know
this ruined place is sacred.

MAP OF CHILDHOOD

I

on this street designed by idealists
neighbors lead parallel lives
though at work

one wears ties one whites

one calculates exposure one is exposed
 his body bombarded
 and no use holding
 his breath

but otherwise share
a drill lawn edger backyard fence

II

in this map of childhood
my house and Carolyn's house are identical
separated by three identical houses
and the intersection of Cottonwood Drive and Cedar Avenue

if you lift off our roofs and peer inside
our lives are mirror images
her brothers sleep in my parents' room
my brothers sleep in her parents' room
and Carolyn's room and my room are the same

and here
exactly where I am pointing
she and I eat snowflakes
as we walk each other home halfway

WHOLE-BODY COUNTER, MARCUS WHITMAN ELEMENTARY

"The mobility of this new laboratory provides versatile capabilities for measuring internally deposited gamma-ray-emitting radionuclides in human beings." —Health Physics, November 1965

We were told to close our eyes.
Everyone was school age now, our
kindergarten teacher reminded us,

old enough to follow directions
and do a little for our country.
My turn came and the scientists

strapped me in and a steady voice
prompted, The counter won't hurt,
lie perfectly still, and mostly I did

and imagined what children
pretend America is, parks
bordered by feathery evergreens,

lawns so green and lush
they soothe the eyes, and pupils
open like love—

a whole country of lawns
like that. Just once I peeked
and the machine had taken me in

like a spaceship and I moved
slow as the sun through the chamber's
smooth steel sky.

I shut my eyes again and pledged
to be still; so proud to be
a girl America could count on.

PLUME

For years
it may be locked
in the matrix
of silt and sand
like a photo-
graphic image
still and
untransported
absorbed
and adsorbed
then
the introduction
of gradient
to unsaturated
soils
percolation
and it awakens
unfurling
like a frond
a carpet unrolling
itself

remote
underground
this beautiful
movement
fanning
between interstices
feathering
void to void
describes
the dark earth
the layering
of permeable
and impermeable
soils

it is out
 of our hands
 this 50 year old
 mistake
 this poison
 yes it is moving
 to the river yes
 it migrates
 between grains
 down to
 saturated sediment
 manifestly down
 and when
 it descends
 as far as it can
 it will swim
 ride droplets
 like swanboats
 float
 spread
 diffuse
 distend
 trailing its
 delicate
 paisley scarf
 and like
 anything
 with a destiny
 a flock of birds
 sperm
 breath
 it will move
 downstream
 to the river
 yes the river
 will take it in

TO CAROLYN'S FATHER

—*Thomas Jerry Deen, 1929–1988*

On the morning I got plucked out of third grade
 by Principal Wellman because I'd written on command
 an impassioned letter for the life of our nuclear plants
 that the government threatened to shut down
 and I put on my rabbit-trimmed green plaid coat
 because it was cold and I'd be on the televised news
 overseeing delivery of several hundred pounds of mail
 onto an airplane bound for Washington DC addressed
 to President Nixon who obviously didn't care about your job

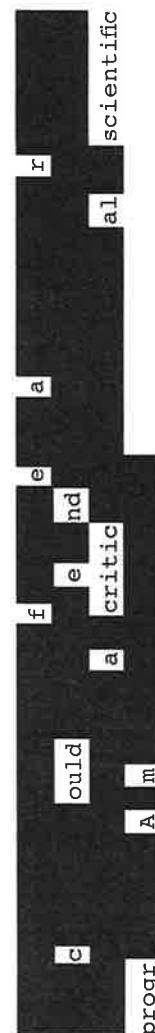
at the same time inside your marrow
 blood cells began to err one moment efficient the next
 a few gone wrong stunned by exposure to radiation
 as you milled uranium into slugs or swabbed down
 train cars or reported to B Reactor for a quick run-in-
 run-out and by that morning Mr. Deen
 the poisoning of your blood had already begun

AFTERNOON'S WIDE HORIZON

That mushroom cloud filling
my cousins' color TV stained orange
what remained black and white at home.
The atomic age had been a fond friend
where I lived in Atomic City. The atom
had something to do with
who I was. Now
the sky on screen filled with fire.
What is that, I asked.

What is that, I asked
the sky on screen filled with fire.
Who I was now
had something to do with
where I lived, in Atomic City. The atom,
the atomic age, had been a fond friend.
What remained black and white at home?
My cousins' color TV stained orange,
that mushroom cloud filling
afternoon's wide horizon.

The dissemination of scientific and technical information relating to atomic energy should be permitted and encouraged so as to provide that free interchange of ideas and criticisms which is essential to scientific progress.—The Atomic Energy Act of 1946



REFRACTION I

READING WELLS

between releasing a pebble to a deep well

and the distant splash rising up
to your ear

you accept all the mysteries
of water and geologic time

the inexorable
wearing down
bringing low everything
no matter everyone

and our mistakes

which are brutish
which will linger ten thousand years
which may end us altogether

one-thousand one
one-thousand two

are unforgiven
and unbounded

but pebble-size
compared with this keyhole view

on what can only be God
it is so deep and unlit

As the industrial and public applications of AEC's future operations will be increasingly a public and not a secret matter, the sooner the present clumsy secrecy of Health Physics techniques is modified the better. —The Atomic Energy Commission, 1948



DEDICATION III

DEPOSITION

—On February 3, 2000, Hanford workers gathered at the request of Department of Energy headquarters to speak publicly about their health problems.

I wasn't there. I'd packed my car with houseplants
years ago, confident my rawhide neighbors would change

their campers' oil, mow and edge their lawns
like always, street after street of Hanford workers

who'd moved 30 years ago
from West Virginia or Pennsylvania or Tennessee

for a job—no saying what it was—for a pre-fab
landscaped with white rocks, for their kids

grown up like me, for their wives, hair freshly done,
comparing prices at Safeway. You know one

you know them all, I said at 25 and moved away,
brushed off the dust and breathed in the liberal city.

So I wasn't there when one by one they rose, walked stiffly
up the aisle in the Federal Building auditorium.

And yet I see them clearly, the same bastards
who grinned when schoolgirls strolled by, who flirted

with John Birch, and hunted pheasant, and owned
their stools at the cinderblock taverns downtown.

Whose sons and daughters would appear at school
sometimes with bruises on their arms.

Carolyn was there to testify and even she can't explain
how anybody there met anybody else's eyes.

It must have choked their throats like rotting meat,
admitting to cancers and hothouse-flower blood diseases,

each a different suffering. How did they stand on stage
and say what nobody could say aloud? And the ones

who came but couldn't speak. It's killing to think of
even now. Every one of them ashamed for falling ill

the way the anti-nuke fanatics said we would,
who've never known shit about anything,

who've never understood us and never will.

SONG OF THE SECRETARY, HOT LAB

All day in a concrete brick building without
even one shaft of natural light, I learned
to stare windows into my typing as my Selectric
raced along at 74 words per minute.

Atomic symbols—Sr-90, Cs-137, I-131,
U-238, Pu-239—darkened my work
like birds tangled in the sky. But I fixed on
clouds of my own bored making,

the small droplets of my idle thoughts,
and I floated among them, oblivious to birds . . .
while on the other side of the wall—
beyond the photo of my kids and dog

lined up in birthday hats—I don't know why
or when, a lab technician innocently moved
a very important brick,
and so a window opened over my desk,

though I never saw its light. All the same,
rays flooded in, and the shadow
of those birds darkened my dosimeter,
and later the mammogram of my right breast.

FLOW CHART

I

when Carolyn's father died
I drew a box around his death

and an arrow referencing
my America my

protective box
erected in the mind

this is how he died
chromosomal mutation
boiling his blood and marrow
exposure to radiation
an arrow a flush of arrows

and this was a circle of lamplight
and Carolyn's grown voice on the phone

and the arrow circling back
to the box containing his death

containing a box
containing a box

II

Carolyn dumps out on her dining table
30 years of exposure documents

one man's official lifetime dose
painstakingly recorded

pencil dosimeter readings
whole-body counts in cramped cursive

radiation reported in units
that keep changing

we study a yellowing questionnaire
with boxes her father filled in

how many fish do you catch and eat each week?
where? what kind? do you hunt local game? local fowl?

yes yes too many my god
pointing trigger fingers at our heads

charades for *shoot me now*

III

one box contains my childhood

the other contains his death

if one is true
how can the other be true?

I think at first I must choose
a box to believe in

but I'm all American

and lightning quick with the shell game

COYOTE

—*Pronunciation: \ kī-ō'-tē, chiefly Western kī'-ōt *

After years away,
I met you again on the tongue
of an old friend from home. *Kī'-ōt.*

Trotting through sagebrush. Wild
by any name. I'd moved to a green isle city
that pronounced you *kī-ō'-tē*

and abandoned you by the side of the road.
I'd forgotten your silver, slope-shouldered form
and gaze.

You're not a citizen of language or memory,
but I am. Changing your name
was a betrayal of home

born of living among outsiders,
born of looking back through outsiders' eyes
at interchangeable houses landscaped

with wishing wells and pansies.
I could never love the brown hills around us.
Now, in the city, who can love the desert in me?

Kī'-ōt. Kī-ō'-tē. You live outside pronunciation.
I'm become like you
and can't say your name either way.

MUSEUM OF DOUBT

—*Nagasaki photos*

My love, allow yourself to stall, just a little,
then enter the collection

of black and white victims.
Like inkblots
they await your reply.

Focus. I'm holding your hand.
Their shadows

on bridges and walls
stop at 11:02

like interrupted sundials.
That, at least, you can respond to.

You'll never make sense of rubble.
The raw body proves difficult Braille.
Illness you can fathom,
with its slippers scuffing along a glassy hall.
But can you feel it?

A kimono pattern imparted to the wearer's skin.

Beloved, you've been carefully trained
(do you sense your resistance?).

Meaning is lost
between the vulnerable eye
and well-defended mind.

Who's on your side (you keep asking)?
Not righteousness, not at this late hour?

Look at you, unsure,
but sure underneath.

DINNER WITH CAROLYN

Monterosso's is a railroad dining car
parked on a gravel lot with views
of a bank and the empty Payless
and the standard Richland tumbleweed tableau

*Just before Dad died
he changed his mind about his life*

They were swamped on a Thursday night
The waitress disappeared
forgot our meals
forgot to wipe up our spills

*University doctors confirmed
his work at Hanford caused
chromosomal mutation
observed in Hiroshima victims
was due to
He would die
from radiation exposure*

I imagined this was a train ride

*Money was always
short on money*

We drank wine
Remembered playing in Carolyn's room
the silk kimono from Korea

*Money was always the last few dollars
He never said no*

I ate capellini with prawns

He milled uranium slugs

Arranged prawn tails

*He emptied train cars
down to the studs and floorboards
pegging the Geiger counter*

*That's where he found the praying mantis
he brought home*

We drank wine
Imagined this was a train ride

*Men came looking for "volunteers"
and offered to pay him extra
that meant the job was off-the-record
hot
bad*

It was twilight

*He never said no I won't
to work nobody else would do*

He called her Tootie
He took us camping in the Blues

*The "volunteers" ran in and out
a minute or two at a time
everybody was scared
short on money
holding his breath*

I remembered holding the praying mantis

*He could have known his grandchildren
20 or 30 years*

I remembered his Marines tattoo

*The Hanford doctors told his lawyer
exposure to farm chemicals
as a youth*

It was twilight
We imagined holding our breath

*Dad said he'd trusted the wrong
people said he was safe*

Forgot our meals

*He gave his life
We won't take money
Money won't bring him back
He deserves a Medal of Honor from our country*

Forgot to wipe up our spills

PORTRAIT OF MY FATHER

I conjure him after dinner, bent over
a pad of quadrille paper and the remnants

of a glass of wine. He pores over typed reports
and hand-scrawled formulas and marginalia.

The sun circles the birdfeeder, curtains open
and close against storms and careening stars,

his thin-striped tie grows paisley wide,
I dial his sideburns short to long to gray.

He faces north, plays Brahms and Mahler
on the record player. The atomic age blossoms

beyond the bank of backyard windows,
and here, on a regular night at home.

I can't know what he knew,
if a friend's or neighbor's or his own life-sum

ever appeared to him in a calculation.
But I do know what a man's life looked like,

how he'd rest his chin in his hand,
weigh a fact or theory, turn a page.

I will never feel so safe again.

MUSEUM OF A LOST AMERICA

I run a gloved hand over my country
like a curator
ready to frame what my mother and father passed down.

My country
like bolts and bolts of fine-gauged fabric
unfurled in the wind
that never touched the weeds and dirt,
not once.

And I was possessive of it
like mother love.
Imagine owning in turn
the four cardinal directions—
orchard in bloom;
crickets at dark;
wheat up to the ridge;
fence line in snow.

Now I practice saying: *I've confused the landscape for my country
and my country for the landscape.*

And add it to my losses—
my sheeplike devotion to my shepherd
that I've kept
as long
as I could.

My country of heroes.
Country of Lincoln.
Country of fallen soldiers
who didn't need to ask what America is.

Country of short memory,
glass surfaces,
and fingerprints easily wiped off.

Country of bombs bursting,
anthems and fireworks,
hand on my heart.

Please advise, should I hang portraits
of my mother and father in this hall?
They're lost.
They taught me this love.

But how it would hurt them
to see it soiled.

I know somehow it's my failure, my fault
that my own country betrayed me.

Oh Beautiful,
I will not stop.
I'll cling to any shred of America remaining,
like a monkey
taken from her mother
and clinging to a mother made of cloth.

IF YOU CAN READ THIS

[turn back]

[death] [horizon to horizon] [bedrock to sky]

[death] [river] [indecipherable]

[death] [dust] [eyes]

[father and mother] [love?] [indecipherable] [horizon to horizon]
[bedrock to sky]

[plume/cloud] [indecipherable] [death] [blooming] [generations]

[indecipherable] [embrace (reaching out?)(pushing away?)] [time passing]

[planet (or atom?)]

[traveler] [death] [turn back]

The 586-square-mile Hanford Site is located along the Columbia River in southeastern Washington State. A plutonium production complex with nine nuclear reactors and associated processing facilities, Hanford played a pivotal role in the nation's defense for more than 40 years, beginning in the 1940s with the Manhattan Project. Today, under the direction of the U.S. Department of Energy, Hanford is engaged in the world's largest environmental cleanup project, with a number of overlapping technical, political, regulatory, financial and cultural issues.

Physical challenges at the Hanford Site include more than 50 million gallons of high-level liquid waste in 177 underground storage tanks, 2,300 tons (2,100 metric tons) of spent nuclear fuel, 12 tons (11 metric tons) of plutonium in various forms, about 25 million cubic feet (750,000 cubic meters) of buried or stored solid waste, and about 270 billion gallons (a trillion liters) of groundwater contaminated above drinking water standards, spread out over about 80 square miles (208 square kilometers), more than 1,700 waste sites, and about 500 contaminated facilities.

—U.S. Department of Energy