

# POETRY NORTHWEST

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## Spring & Summer 2013 – The Photography Issue

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WHAT'S IT TO YOU

My main connection to photography is my collaborative work, *Debtor's Prison*, which I worked on with Julie Harrison in 2001 and which was published by Granary Books in 2002. Julie is both a photographer and a filmmaker and the photographic images in the book are stills from her movies. There's a photograph on the right-hand side of every page. The text is on the left-hand side. There's no direct connection between the photo and the words. Juxtaposition creates its own sense of connectedness; description, in this case, would feel redundant. It's always more interesting to pick up clues and hints along the way, to grope around in the dark, rather than to achieve some kind of conclusiveness. I think Julie and I were trying to create a texture out of the enmeshment of my words and her photos. (My favorite collaborative book, by poet and photographer, is *Mediterranean Cities*, by Edwin Denby and Rudy Burckhardt, where a quick impressionistic glimpse by Denby, in the form of a sonnet, indirectly matches the street scenes in Burckhardt's photos.) You can create a narrative, moving from one end of *Debtor's Prison* to the other, and each time you read the book you'll find a different story-line, both intended and not. Something mysterious is conveyed, and possibly a third element, like the third term, is necessary to synthesize everything.



The text is split into two parts:

A tiny speedboat bouncing over choppy waves

*brightness of yearning / a rivulet at the curb's edge.*

Where the second line is a comment on the first; and the entire text is a comment on the photo, which in this case is a close up of an older woman who appears several times throughout the book. In this photo we only see one eye, half a forehead, the nose, and a hat, which is like a golfer's cap, with brim. And the ear—with wisps of hair escaping from beneath the cap.



The connection between the lines of poetry and the photo is the indirectness, which is consistent throughout. At least that was the goal. Julie's photographs create their own narrative. There are hospital scenes—these are the photos with the clearest focus. Many of the other photos are blurred, including many of the old woman. I tried to capture the blurriness in the poems as well:

It seemed like you had never undressed  
in her presence

*enmeshment of opposites / no one to blame*

The photo opposite these lines: two hands clapping, or about to clap. Another close-up: five fingers of one hand, four fingers of the other, against a black background. The ends of the fingers taper off into fuzziness, as if surrounded by a small flame.



For a while I took photos with a disposable camera. It occurred to me that I could dispose of the camera without ever processing the film—isn't that what disposable means? But I ended up taking the disposable camera to either a camera store or a pharmacy to make prints. Those places don't exist anymore. Photo stores don't really exist, and they'll never come back. So I don't have a camera, but I have many prints, as well as negatives of old photos. I have photo albums. I don't want to depend on the computer for everything.

Another photo project was my book *Bustin's Island '68*, also published by Granary, in 1996. I had written a small memoir about a summer I spent on an island off the coast of Maine, summer of 1968, and pasted the text into a book alongside photos taken from the same time. Steve Clay created an edition of 70 copies, each with original prints, with a spiral binding. In this case, there's a direct connection between photos and text. The photos are of real people, the "characters," so to speak, in the text. There's even an index in the back identifying all the people.

Photographs tie into the curiosity we have about the past—our own and others'—and what people (and things) looked like. But the computer, and the digital world, in general, makes everything look the same. I want to touch things, not just look at them. I think there's a difference.