



WATERSHED

WATERSHED

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Contents

Poetry

Heather Brittain Bergstrom	Off Highway Seventeen, Eastern Washington	6
	Wedding Day Love Poem	7
	Young Mother	8
	Clinging	9
	Visiting San Francisco the Day Before My Mother's Mastectomy	10
Patricia Caspers	I have nothing to mourn	22
Jacqueline Devlin	Autumn Equinox	19
	Thief	20
Bob Garner	under my hat	1
Catherine Goggia	I Dreamt of a Love	36
Laura Hall	From a Father	30
Matt helms	Drive All Night	23
	Drylake in Utah off Highway 50	25
	Flooded	26
	Muse	5
Sarah Hockman	The Steady	4

Marc Horton	The Ritual	33
	Shoes	35
Debbie McCallum	Naked Laundry	2
	Please Forward	3
Kristi Matson	Keeper	18
Barbara Melton	Daddy	21
Sean Murphy	Freedom	27
Marissa Nokes	Two Puces	39
r. eirik ott	bookends	40
Marilyn Ringer	Still Life	37
Nancy Talley	Hag	31
Fiction		
r. eirik ott	the girl on the bus	43
N.A. Stratton	Thanksgiving Dinner	28
Zu Vincent	Witnessing the Skyhole	11
Illustration		
Catherine Goggia	I Hope You Like It	46

under my hat*Bob Garner*

on the corner
i meet
a sharkskin suit
with a button-down collar
and a paisley tie.
he's smoking a black cigarette,
his monocle is cracked,
his hands are shaking.

how are you?
i ask,
and he replies:

i'm walking around
with all this stuff
under my little homburg,
all this cranial carnage,
explosions every day,
limbs ripped away,
the dark god
laughing my head off,
till jaundice-colored demons
scramble out my neck—

and how are you?

oh,
i'm just fine,
i say,
as i brush the bats
away
from my sombrero.

2 Watershed

Naked Laundry

Debbie McCallum

Stepping out of our winter clothes
naked pawns
on a checkerboard floor

You sit on a plastic lawn chair
reading the Sunday comics
stomach shaking like the spin cycle
when you laugh out loud
at Snoopy

Separating the dark and light
Arm & Hammer beating out the impurities
The man in the corner can't stop
staring at my breasts
you cover with dryer sheets
activated by your hot breath

Jerking to a halt
the cycle ends
Stepping into boxers and 501's
feet sticking to the soap stained floor
Pulling on my dry panties
wet instantly from the heat
The man in the corner pretends to stare
through the glass door that reads
Naked Laundry

Please Forward*Debbie McCallum*

You moved in without asking
Scattering your dirty underwear
And bad habits like you
Owned the place
I picked up after you
Scrubbing the toilet
Making the bed
Until you left
Without a clue
As to where to forward
Your dirty underwear

4 Watershed

The Steady

Sarah Hockman

There is a man in my bed.
Slack mouth
and sleep breathing.
Even at the table
with my coffee I know
that mouth
teeth.
Arms above his head
hands curled
into loose fists.
He groans
rolls over
and creaks into the bathroom.
Even the hard stream of piss
sounds familiar.
Flush,
faucet. And back
in my bed
as if it were his own.

Muse*Sarah Hockman*

This lady
Isn't one of the timid who
Choking in a restaurant
Silently excuse themselves
To die
Unembarrassed
In the restroom.

She'll give Herself
The Hiemlich
Leaning over her own chair
Punching it out
Pulpy
Next to the startled waiter's black shoe.

6 Watershed

Off Highway Seventeen, Eastern Washington

Heather Brittain Bergstrom

Bending her fifteen year old body over empty ketchup
bottles
at Bob & Ernie's Truck Stop seven miles from town and
her father's house
she burns her wrist on a steak plate—prime rib, Thurs-
day night special.
The rare ones with their crusts of raw fat make her sick.

She helps the dishwasher scrape plates in the back
using her hands to pick up half-eaten potatoes,
dinner rolls with thick slabs of butter,
lettuce with oily dressing that stains her apron pockets
full of dollar bills, quarters, pennies that no one wants.

After eleven no one comes in but old men in plaid shirts
who smell like diesel fuel and drink coffee slowly from
thick brown cups.
She hears one trucker say her ass moves like a swivel
chair.
Later he tells her to wrap her arms around him
like she does the tub of gravy soaked plates.

She exchanges phone numbers with men three times her
age
who leave her five dollar tips and the usual twenty from
Chuck Fuller
wrapped in a clean white napkin with a scribbled dirty
message.

After her shift she drives into the country
with the dishwasher Todd Keanade.
They park just above the spillway at Miller's Canal,
smoke home grown marijuana from a Coke can.
He holds her against his dishwater-soaked jeans.
Fingers, then mouth searching for her nipples.
She pulls down her coffee colored nylons.

Wedding Day Love Poem*Heather Brittain Bergstrom*

The Sacramento summer left us tanned
and looking healthier than we were
walking the mid-morning streets of Las Vegas
looking for a chapel that could charm away
our hangover headaches from the night before
when we'd lost two hundred on the quarter slots
and spent the night on sheets that smelled like bleach
in a room where mirrors lined each wall
and the television played porn on all three channels.

In the lobby of Cupid's Hall
you picked me a bouquet of plastic carnations
held my hand while we waited for the music to rewind.
The minister wore a walnut colored dress
that matched her wrinkled skin.
You slipped your mother's silver band on my finger
said "I do" with her thick German accent.
We drove the eleven hours home
eating frozen Sara Lee cake,
white frosting melting in the Mojave heat.

8 Watershed

Young Mother

Heather Brittain Bergstrom

On Sundays at church you sang hymns the loudest
closing your eyes during *Amazing Grace*.

You made us memorize verses
from the maroon Bible you kept beside your bed,
taught us to love a God we couldn't see.

We searched for hours in drawers and along curbs
for change to buy you sodas on hot afternoons,
took turns holding the two liters of Coke
on the long walks home from the store.

The laundry stayed on the couch and floor for weeks
before it was folded and put away.
We sat on top of it in the mornings
watched cartoons while you slept.

You took us to The Salvation Army
to pick out school clothes—
let us buy dresses two times too big,
shoes with high heels,
and beaded clip earrings that left our ears red.

On days you forgot to pick us up from school
we played hop-scotch in the parking lot
until the principal drove us home.

When the minister suggested
letting us stay with his family for a while
we stopped going to church.
Then the food stamps didn't come in the mail
and we went back, stomachs growling,
our last three dollars in the collection plate.
After the service you took us to the minister's house to play.

That evening when we came home
we found you in bed, empty pill boxes on the floor.
At the hospital we couldn't touch you.
You talked of getting new towels.
Your mouth was black from charcoal
and your breath took ours away.

Clinging

Heather Brittain Bergstrom

In the waiting room of Sutter Oncology
an old man coughs bloody phlegm
into a folded handkerchief.
His wife fills a flowered Dixie cup with water
and holds it to his mouth.

The child on the floor next to me
begins climbing up his mother
pulling her cotton dress off one shoulder.
She puts down the People Magazine
and takes him into her arms.

I finish reading the pamphlet
on advanced breast cancer
I've been holding for an hour.
On the front is a sketch
of a woman by a lake.
V-shaped birds fly above her head.
Her body looks lean and healthy
standing in the tall grass.

In a minute the receptionist
will call me to a room.
I'll lie with my breasts naked
on the paper covered examining table.
The doctor will find walnut sized lumps
too quickly and pull back his hands.

He'll say *cancer*
as if repeating a word he learned as a child.
His blue shirt will seem too wrinkled,
his skin too taut.
He won't reach for my hand, my shoulder.
He'll look at the floor, the wall.

And I'll begin clinging to yesterday,
the morning, my last taste of coffee
before *seven months* was said.

Visiting San Francisco
the Day Before My Mother's Mastectomy
Heather Brittain Bergstrom

Vendor man with Greek eyes
romancing my sister and me.
A sweatshirt for Angela! he says.
We buy three.

Eat potato soup from bowls of bread
dipping thick crusts of sourdough in white gravy.
Across the street at the wax museum
Marilyn Monroe smiles in the window.

At the print shop on Columbus Street
we pick an O'Keeffe poster
for our mother's hospital room:
Narcissa's Last Orchid.

We walk wooden sidewalks
brushing arms with strangers on Fisherman's Wharf.
The rain starts slowly.
Black umbrellas open like flowers above us.

As we drive through the city
houses look like scattered cracker crumbs on the hillside.
Balconies move up and down like steps.
And the sea surrounds us.

Witnessing the Skyhole

Zu Vincent

Neal lets me think, right up until the last moment, that he isn't going to show. Then he surprises me. People are always surprising you, even in death. For instance, as I carry our brother's ashes out to Neal's truck, Jamie seems heavier now than he did the last, sad days of his life.

I've never held human ashes before. They're wrapped in plastic sealed with a dog tag, the plastic tucked in a vinyl box and the vinyl box encased in cardboard. This last is an ordinary cardboard box, like you'd buy at any Mail Boxes Etc. In fact, the whole thing is very ordinary, even mundane. Cremains, they call them.

Jamie warned me once, when he told me to have him cremated, not to be surprised if I came across a few bones in the ashes. That was his experience when scattering his friends in the river. A task he'd had to do more than once.

Today, it's my turn, and Neal's, to scatter Jamie in the ocean.

Jamie was our older brother, though not old enough to be dead now. He and Neal weren't close—Neal being an ex-Marine and confirmed bachelor, didn't like to link himself with a gay man. Yet here he is volunteering to return with me to the spot where we once played as children.

"I see you brought Sassy," I say. Sassy was Jamie's dog, a pit bull Neal's been caring for since one of Jamie's friends begged off keeping her. Jamie loved his pit. He raised her affectionately, and took her everywhere with him. As a result she's almost human, and she watches us with knowledgeable, pale brown eyes. When Neal got her, she had scabs on her rear and a peculiar smell, but she's healthier now. The scabs are gone, although the peculiar smell lingers. I pat her carefully.

We're taking Neal's truck, and since it's a four-hour drive, I make him clean the cab, where Sassy's been riding, and fashion a place for her in the open bed. A dog lover, he frets about this. Will she be happy? Comfortable? Safe? He takes my best carpet remnant for her

to lie on, and ties her halter firmly to his tie-down rings. Then he drops his bombshell.

"She's not coming back," he says, ruffling her short, stiff neck fur.

"What?"

"When we get there, somewhere remote, I'm going to put her down."

"Put her down?" My throat tightens. I may not like the smell of her, but I like *her*.

"Shoot her." He helps me out. "I brought my pistol."

"I thought you liked her." I hear the wail in my voice and try to disguise it. It doesn't work to tell Neal what to do, then he'll surely do the opposite.

"I sold my house. I'm moving to an apartment," he explains. "There's nowhere to keep her, and she's too old to find her another home."

Even though Jamie himself requested this if no one wanted her, I can't bear the thought now, and offer to take her myself, despite the fact she hates my two dogs.

"You know you can't." Neal is firm.

"Then have a vet do it," I protest. "Don't shoot her. It's... it's inhuman."

"And a vet, a stranger, injecting her, isn't?" He shakes his head. "No, if anyone does it, it's going to be me," he decides, Marine-like. "I'm the one who takes care of her."

"You won't be able to." I study him, earnest and lean and unfathomable. "You'll cry. Remember *Old Yeller*?" We all cried, when we were kids, at *Old Yeller*.

"No," he says.

Neal is tired from a night of drinking and carousing, and lets me drive. He slumps in the passenger seat looking every now and then out the back window to check on Sassy. He's worried that she's thirsty, unhappy, too hot in the sun. But now his worry takes on a macabre meaning.

"Look how you love her," I warn, "you won't be able to do it." But this is only what I want to believe. The truth is, I don't know what he'll do.

We have to drive south, down the valley through the orchards, and past the dry grasslands before we cut west to the coast. California is still hot in September, hot and brown, but it's cooler and greener along the river. We both stare into the curving water as we drive past.

"We could scatter him here," Neal says, "save ourselves the drive."

"Do you want to?"

He hesitates, then says, awkwardly, "You know, he was my brother, and I don't even know if I loved him."

The Yahi, a mountain Indian tribe of the Sierra Nevada, believed that a person's soul traveled south after death, south to a hole in the sky where one climbed to heaven, alone. They called it the Journey of the Dead. I keep driving because I think that today, Neal and I need our own journey. We need to take Jamie home to that innocent time we used to have as children, vacationing at the ocean.

Neither of us are hungry, but at noon we stop at Burger King, where Neal buys Sassy a chicken sandwich with cheese. When she wolfs it down, he buys her another. "You're hoping the food will kill her first," I say, watching. But he eats fast food too, and doesn't appreciate the joke.

We've come far enough south now, and though it's still a couple of hours to the ocean, we can turn west. It makes us feel we're getting closer.

"Where'd you put him?" Neal asks when we're back on the road.

"You mean the box? Behind the seat," I say, "why?"

"I don't know," he says, "it just seems strange."

"If you shoot Sassy, what will you do with her?"

He shrugs. "I'll put her in the ocean, too."

"It's illegal."

"What?"

"It's illegal. So's this, what we're doing." I explain there's a fee for dumping ashes anywhere but home. A fee I didn't pay.

"Even the ocean?" He's incredulous. I know what he means. The ocean seems to belong to everyone.

14 *Watershed*

"The funeral director told me to lie and save the money. If they won't let you scatter ashes, they won't let you dump a dog."

I know Neal hates doing anything illegal, and I hope this will worry him enough to keep him from shooting Sassy. But I'm glad I lied. Jamie would've been incensed had I paid to scatter him.

Drake's Bay nestles close to the end of the Point Reyes Peninsula, like an arch beneath the heel of a tall shoe. The peninsula itself forms a long empty stretch of rock, bluff and cattle land, cut through by a lonely road. There seems to be nothing out here save a few dairy farms, some microwave stations and wires. First we head to the farthest point of land, where the lighthouse sits.

It's a beautiful, sunny afternoon, the usual coastal wind. Standing at the high point overlooking the lighthouse, we can turn in a circle and see the entire misty horizon, the entire curve of the earth, like a ring around us. It feels as if we've come to the end of something, which is to say, its exact center.

As we climb down the steps from the observation point, two rangers are standing over a possum they caught raiding their garbage can. The possum is "playing possum," lying still as stone against some rocks, only his beady eyes moving laconically. The way his pink eye-rims and pink rodent feet seem exposed, almost burnt, by sunlight, makes me remember.

Near the end, Jamie clamped his mouth shut and refused to eat. We'd sit him up in bed, but his scrawny neck could not support his head, and his chicken-wing arms caved in at his sides.

"He's giving up!" The nurse was in tears. "We've got to make him eat."

I knew better. I knew he'd made up his mind, was playing dead already, with grace enough to save us his suffering. I saw the stranger that had emerged from the bones of his skull, and like the possum, this stranger seemed burnt, exposed by the light of the living.

I just wanted to be with him when he died. The moment he died, for I had a terror of his leaving alone. I'd go from his room and come back within the hour, vigilant.

But he fooled me, he did die alone, somehow knowing in his coma the minute I'd walked out of the room. I've since learned this isn't uncommon, that people often seek solitude for their last, most private act.

When I came back into the room, it was very quiet, the stillness of his departure a budding hush. The tape I'd left playing for him had run out, so nothing remained. He'd gone south, found the door and shut it on me in my absence. I couldn't even see the skyhole.

"What were you playing for him?" Neal asked nervously when he arrived, indicating the tape.

"The Last of the Mohicans," I said. It's what our father always called us kids, affectionately, "the last of the Mohicans." The irony struck me now.

Neal fidgeted, and tried to joke. "I guess he didn't like your taste in music."

After we scatter the ashes at Drake's Bay, we go to South Beach, because dogs are allowed. Let loose, Sassy runs along the steep, gravelly bank, her wiggly brown body excited by the waves.

"It's almost deserted," Neal says significantly, looking up and down the beach. "Let's walk down a ways."

A lone pair of men are walking toward us. Sassy reaches them first. They stop to pat her, telling us when we come close how they have a pit bull, too.

"I wish she were with us," one man says wistfully. He wears an earring in one ear, and his clothes have a meticulous air, as does his clipped hair. His partner sports the half-gypsy, half-pirate look some gays achieve almost automatically.

I notice these things now. It's like being pregnant, or going bald; you see all the bald or pregnant people you never saw before. And I wonder, do they have IT?

"Yeah, they're great dogs," the gypsy-pirate agrees about pit bulls. I wonder if they might like Sassy enough to take her. If they take her, she'll be saved. She won't end up with a bullet in her head or a bubble in her vein,

but will be loved and cared for by people who adore pit bulls, smell and all. I'm about to ask, I want to ask, but then it occurs to me, what if they say yes? How could I let her go with strangers?

Maybe Neal's right. It's better to let him take care of it. Better to know. He's already walking away. I call to Sassy and we follow him on down the beach, against the wind.

"Up there," Neal says as we catch up. He points to the empty sand dunes. "Let's rest." We sit on a log and Sassy curls next to us, watching Neal's every move, the tense way he huddles. Out here she seems to have lost her bad smell, to have taken on the scent of fresh air and salt water.

"Come on," Neal gets up shortly and calls to Sassy. "Let's go, girl." She follows him blithely over the dunes. I turn my back and watch the trembling ocean.

For all those horrible minutes, I sit still, unmoving, trying not to listen. I squeeze my eyes shut, thinking of the possum. Thinking of Jamie at the last. Playing dead. I wish, like Neal, not to know that I loved him. I could stop Neal now, but I don't. It has something to do with losing Jamie. As long as Neal and I are still here, trapped under the skyhole, I'll go on waiting to understand the brother I have left.

And I do know him a little better when he comes back over the dunes, Sassy trailing behind him.

I scratch her ears when she reaches me.

"I knew you couldn't do it," I say, relieved.

"Do what?" He squints at the ocean.

"You know."

He sighs. "Hell, I didn't even bring the pistol from the truck."

Neal's still tired, so I drive home. He worries that Sassy's cold in the back, but when we check she seems fine. He falls asleep on the passenger side, cryptic as usual, and I turn the music up. Our journey is done, but I want to recount it. I want to remember for the rest of my life, rolling up our pant legs to walk into the waves.

Drake's Bay was calm, the Pacific as pure blue as if nothing had ever touched it. The September sun fell at

its most nostalgic slant, catching the sandpipers' white wings like a kiss. It gleamed along the wave-washed shore, warming our shoulders as we waded out.

We discarded the cardboard box and opened the vinyl one. Removed the tag. Jamie was wrong, there were no bones in the plastic, only a small, official looking scrap of paper like you get in the box with a new product: a guarantee, instructions.

We stood calf deep and I opened the bag, scattering his fine dust. When I got halfway through I started to cry.

"You do some, Neal." I tried to hand the bag to him.

"No," he said, drawing me to him. "It's okay. You can finish." His hug was tender.

The waves rolled out. I let fall the rest of the ashes. The wind brought them stubbornly back against my shins.

"Now you'll have to wash," Neal said. But I didn't want to. I wanted my brother's dust to stay on my skin, to be absorbed into my pores, forever. A larger wave came, surprising us, soaking us to our waists.

Surprised, Neal and I ran from the waves, laughing like kids. On firm sand we turned back. My legs were clean. Jamie was gone.

18 Watershed

Keeper

Kristi Matson

Hearing the geese,
I step out to look
up, see them glowing

and streaming
white against a star
dappled black drop.

Why not be content
with their innocent arrow?
Its tip unravels

the taut darkness
seamlessly into
white light.

Autumn Equinox*Jacqueline Devlin*

Summer is falling
outside my window.
The innocence of green
crumbles into caustic crimsons
irate oranges, and yes,
already the futility of yellow.
Soon, we will possess
only, the dry sheddings
of her skin.
Demeter, today I closed my eyes
and felt your tears
frost my lids.

Thief

Jacqueline Devlin

Even in sleep, the air around my father
seemed to stretch and hum.
At night, I would creep into his room slowly,
past the bottles on the night stand,
empty of their orders, like Hitler in Bavaria.
And he slept, as Goeth must have slept.
Daddy, you never knew,
at night I walked your presence without fear,
braved the trunks of your legs,
studied the moss of your hair, and
watched the pulse beat slowly in your throat.
In darkness we were equal.
Your arms, bigger than my waist
lay helpless at your side
those enormous hands tangled
like a child's in the blanket.
In a few hours, the ovens of your eyes
would open and fill the air with smoke,
your body, rise like a tower
and commence its random fire.
But for a while,
as night thawed into dawn,
I could sit, listen to the clock
time your breathing
and hold your hands in mine.

Daddy*Barbara Melton*

Daddy's coming!
He always comes;
I think he'll come forever.
"It's a secret," he says
and laughs.
Daddy's laugh makes me
think of Preacher Smith's devil.

Daddy's hands are
shaky, cold, sweaty
like the frog I caught last summer,
sticky on my body.
Daddy's breath is hot,
like the thick air at the dump.
It burns.
Daddy's voice is
like the whispers coming
out of the dark closet.

Daddy's coming!
I'm scared. I say,
"Don't whimper.
Don't cry."
I close my eyes tightly
like the Sand Man glued my lids...
breathe like a sleeping child...
lie still like Barbie...

Daddy's coming!
I won't look.
I'll sleep;
then it's just a bad dream.

22 Watershed

I have nothing to mourn

Patricia Caspers

My mother, eight years old,
played with toy horses on the living room carpet
while Jackie jumped from the convertible,
blood on her pink dress.

I had no ears to hear
Coretta Scott King
speak of her husband's dreams,
of her own dreams,
cooled under April rain.

I have nothing to mourn.
My body never forced to the ground in Senegal,
pressed by women who love me,
and my clitoris never cut with broken glass.

I will marry the man I choose.
He might bruise my lips, or eyes,
but only once,
and he will not burn me,
like a Bengali bride
in a midnight kitchen fire.

My children
will have oatmeal, plums,
milk at the breakfast table,
and walking to school
they might be shot
for the small goddesses
worn on their feet.

I have nothing to mourn here
where I did not have an appointment
the sunny day my clinic was bombed.

In America,
I will earn every penny
of the sixty percent I am worth.

Drive All Night

Matt Helms

We take the St. Charles trolley from Loyola dorms
to Bourbon Street, eat spicy Cajun catfish sandwiches
and drink beers uncared in the 'Bourbon Bistro.'
Out in the street, everyone's drunk or drinkin;
occasional men strut by, lookin us over
from toe to eye, wearin evening gowns,
probably wonderin whether we're that way.
Seems every building on the block is a bar,
strip joint or restaurant, if not a T-shirt shop
fulla tourist junk, or dildos, oils, and studded leather.
We notice two-for-one specials at all the bars,
so we stop for ours at 'The Krazy Korner.'
Waitress is haggard white, writes down our orders,
says "Be right back" with that pack-a-day rasp
of the old burnt-out party queen. Then Jack's
two-fistin screwdrivers, while Sonny and I joke
about the smallness of the rum-and-okes we slug
and the band comes out the back room—all older,
jazzy black, dressed in red sport-jackets, ties, and slacks,
they start workin their instruments into song,
as we sit boppin along, tappin our feet
and groovin to the tunes.
Then strolls in a huge woman in a glittering red gown,
grabs the mic on stage and starts wailin out
an Aretha Franklin song. Sings the first verse
or so, comes down off the stage—then wouldn't you know—
strolls straight over to me, screams "R-E-S-P-E-C-T,"
right up in my face so close I can smell her breath
and all in the place got their eyes on me, but I just laugh.

Later find myself staggerin the street alone,
lookin for that lover I's hopin to find on this crazy strip
of our post-grad-quest-mission-America-road-trip.
Meet a cat on the corner says he's gotta joint for me,
me feelin naive good vibes about everybody jump
right into a cab with him, headed straight for the projects.
So here I am in a run-down shack, passing a crack-pipe
from this cat to that and wonderin if I'll ever see
my family and friends back home again. One cat

24 *Watershed*

finally leaves, claimin he's goin to get my weed,
and it's just me and this crack-fiend chillin like villains
and I'm wonderin when I'm gonna make my break.
Knowin well my dough's goin back in the crack bowl,
I cut out when homey hits the bathroom,
sprint my ass out and follow the faint sounds and lights
I see a couple miles off, glimmering through the night
and think about Mike—the forty-sumpthin brother
we rapped with at the Bistro.

"Whatever ya'll do, don't go in them projects," he'd said,
"those niggaz'll roll all four of us for nothin—
they don't give a fuck." Longest run of my life,
me trying not to think about
what might lurk round that next corner
and imagining the headlines.

Finally find my way back to the music, and there tell Jack
and Sonny my story between gasps for air. Stoppin to soak
in the jazz, I spy two muscular-legged ladies
struttin by, and say "Whatsup?" They answer with "Howdy's"
and continue talkin—southern accents so sweet
the words drip from their mouths like syrup.
Back to the Bistro for rounda beers,
we all sit back, drink quick and spit drunken conversa-
tion
over the tables; they tell us they're from Texas.
The one I'm fallin in love with, Cori, is brunettic athletic
with a smile larger than her native state.
Before they leave our room that night,
we hold hands, make out, and she pleads with me
to stay just one more day. But we're low on dough
and gotta go the next morning, whole drive north
I curse myself for not gettin her address
as I gaze outside
and watch my first ever fireflies.

Drylake, In Utah, Off Highway 50*Matt Helms*

We walk in the desert
toward a mirage of water
leaving distinct footprints
in crystallized sand—
whitened with salt—
that yields to our weight
and crunches beneath our feet.

Four inches under
this lake bed's crusty layer
pliable piles of clay
that could have made mountains of pottery
lie untouched.

But those who lived on this barren land—
pushed out, long since,
by foreigners with salty faces—
did not think of this then
when the lake splashed full with wind
and clay was deep beneath the surface,
unseen,
like the greedy dreams
of new settlers
pushing westward.

Flooded

Matt Helms

With a sickly heave
I cough up clouds
of milky mucus
from deep down inside
eyes watering.
Outside my window
the January sky
showers this great valley
with tearing rain—
relentless and heavy
it floods the town
into pools of worry.
Cars become islands
hazards flashing.

In Bidwell Park
there are trees torn
from their dense green beds.
Trunks now buried in a heap of grass
roots ripped from their tracks—
a gnarled forest
of wooden wires
still struggling to draw life
from the saturated soil.

I close my weary eyes—
congested head calmed
by my pillow—
and I see the Earth
is telling us something:
We think
we are so
powerful.

This
is our sickness.

freedom*Sean Murphy*

Every day I linger on
Under the spell of
This room's dull mechanical hum.
How much damage can
A single virus do?
Now I'm supposed to live with this
Animal until they decide it's eaten me enough.
Someone please blow out the candle
Inside my head
And put my body to rest.

Thanksgiving Dinner

N. A. Stratton

Thanksgiving Day broke bright and beautiful on the city by the bay. Soon traditional smells filled the house in the Haight. Ronny McNab heard Helen's family arriving for dinner. "God, what time is it?" Lately, sleep had become a welcome escape.

As Ron scraped his chin in front of the mirror, he wondered that no one had remarked on his new gauntness and the haunted look in his hazel eyes. Ron helped himself to some holiday cheer after he'd dressed and come downstairs to face his in-laws. Then he took a walk.

"The baby looks like she could use some air," he told his wife.

"Don't be too long now, dear. Dinner's almost ready," Helen McNab replied as she checked the turkey. She had other things on her mind.

Ronny McNab and his four-month-old, bundled-up daughter, Mary Claire, strolled along Geary in a leisurely, almost hesitant, fashion. As they turned up Lincoln toward the Golden Gate, they ran into Dapper Dan, a street person. Dressed in his usual elegant, though slightly shabby (truthfully, downright dirty) bowler, waistcoat, and gloves, Dan shouted at Ron and the baby, "Splendid day the Lord's made for us today, in't it Mate?"

Ron usually stopped to chat with Dan and get a chuckle from his act, but this Thanksgiving Day Ron barely acknowledged him and picked up speed. The bridge beckoned and shone in the golden sunlight.

Mary Claire gurgled at the speed and the bumps; she didn't know her father held a secret. Helen McNab started wondering what was keeping her husband and the baby. The potatoes were almost done.

As Ron pushed the stroller, he reviewed the past few months. "God, how could things be so screwed up? How could I have known that I would have to pay for my sins eight years later? Why does she have to suffer? Helen can take care of herself, but how can I watch my beautiful baby suffer?"

People traveling across the Golden Gate Bridge on their way to Thanksgiving dinner thought father and daughter made a charming sight highlighted against the azure sky and the gleaming mountains. When Ron reached the middle of the bridge he took Mary Claire out of her stroller and gave her a long hug, murmuring endearments in her ear. Then Ron tucked her under one arm (somewhat like a football) and with his other arm climbed up the guard rail of the bridge. With no further hesitation, Ronny McNab stepped off into nothing.

Cars and trucks on the bridge screeched and swerved, nearly causing tragedies of their own. The search-and-rescue dive team recovered Ron's body almost immediately. No note was found, and Helen McNab never knew what drove her husband to such an act. They never found little Mary Claire's body. She had been swept out to sea to become Thanksgiving dinner for the fish.

From a Father

Laura Hall

Yesterday you told me
that a person could put their eye out
on the top of a pineapple
I agreed. The fronds
on a pineapple are rigid and sharp
The ends could puncture the soft
shell of an eye.
Then you told me I should move it
Take it out of the fruit bowl
Immediately cut the top off
when I brought one home from the grocery store
And I want to tell you that
you have me caged in safety
I will avoid dark streets alone at night
I won't pet strange dogs
I'll stop the microwave before
opening the door to
avoid radiation poisoning
But I won't let you make me afraid of fruit
And the pineapple is staying
right here.

Hag*Nancy Talley*

she fits my skin
exactly a meniscus
under my visible hide

emergent
she screeches
and yowls at night
by the light of full moons
pouring their power
into her teaching
weird tunes

she garlands
her withered frame
in flamboyant flame
colored gauze runs beads
round her neck
up her arms
till she jingles

she drinks green teas
ground with bones
of brown owls pinions
her outrageous hair
with feathers
mouse vertebrae swing
from her ears

her eyesight has dimmed
her vision
has cleared she sees
your heart beating
bloody and red

she sweeps her hut clean
on a snaggle-toothed broom
she can ride
through the dead man's hour
over the roofs

32 *Watershed*

of dull pilgrims
where she pauses
drops her voluminous
drawers squats
and pees down their chimneys

The Ritual*Marc Horton*

I went to see my father
at the hospital
every day after school
when he was sick
from the disease
that had wrapped itself
around his lungs
and would not let go.
I brought him
his electric razor,
glasses, and the day's paper
which I read to him.
When dinner came,
I cut up the chicken
into small bites
and buttered his roll.
We shared dessert,
usually fruit cocktail
or stale applesauce.
Then I would watch
as he shaved,
the way he carefully began
at his neck,
moving under his chin
sliding the razor
with brisk strokes
across his cheeks,
his eyes closed,
ending with his sideburns
and mustache,
always leaving a small patch
of gray-black hair
above his lip
because of the oxygen tube
taped into his nose.
When the doctor came
to give him his treatments
I would finish
my history homework

34 *Watershed*

or practice binomial equations,
listening behind
the yellow nylon curtain
for the whisper
of my father's breath
buried somewhere beneath
the rattle of the machine.
We talked about politics
and baseball,
about fishing in the delta
when he got better
and spring finally came,
as the new nurse on shift
changed the needles
that fed into
and out of his frail arm.
I held my father's hand
and wiped his forehead
with a damp blue cloth
until he fell asleep
watching the news on the TV
mounted in the corner
of the room
with the sound
turned off.

Shoes*Marc Horton*

"These shoes hurt," she says,
standing in the closet
staring down at her feet.
"I think I'll wear these instead."
She holds up a pair
of black boots.

Those look fine, I tell her.

"But what about these?" she asks,
pointing at a pair of tan sandals
that lie next to the bed.
"No," she changes her mind
before I answer,
"they always slip off my feet."

The black ones are fine, I say.

"Okay," she answers and smiles.
The door of the closet
is half-open and behind it,
I can see her stretching
to put on a blue top,
smoothing her plaid skirt
with her hands.

It is the single
most perfect thing
I have ever seen,
and just as I feel
like telling her that,
I am suddenly silent.

It is enough,
I believe,
to see her crouch
in front of the full-length mirror
that leans against the wall
and begin combing her hair
with a pink brush.

I Dreamt of a Love

Catherine Goggia

I dreamt of a love

More honest than swearing to God

More passionate than a summer grass fire

More trusting than a newborn

More naked than clothes off

More constant than gravity

More joyous than helium balloons in flight

More spontaneous than a waterfall

More worth it than a trip to the moon...

Still Life*Marilyn Ringer*

I ate the Satsuma mandarin
A section at a time.
They had looked so eloquent
On the blue plate
In the candle light.
Two whole, two peeled
And splayed in half.
A cobalt tumbler full
Of pure, cool water
Sat atop the blue
Windowpane napkin.
A cut glass vase
With three winter roses,
Two bloomed, one tightly budded,
Rested on Neruda's famous Twenty
And the one about Despair.
Sacred space inside
A sphere of fragrant light.

Cezanne dissolved details
Into effects
As the eye does when
We enter a room in a hurry.
Subliminal impressions
Sink into the soul's ocean
And resurface as flotsam
Fragments in our dreams
While we are left
To wonder at their meaning
Encoded in the bizarre
Transposition of the mundane.
Am I to be the artist
Of anticipated animation,
Preserving ever this moment
Before the sip, the bite,
Light formed and captured
In the bonding paint,
Charging each scene
With emotional impasto

38 *Watershed*

Creating a singular space
In which to worship?

When I ate the second Satsuma
I knew you were not coming.
Anticipation,
Your gift to me,
In the precious moments
Before the fruit was consumed.

Two Puces*Marissa Nokes*

Puce better describes the hue
that surrounds the avocado's sun,
but it is the velvet cloak of a Shakespearean
actor. Puce is not the shag carpet that
we sprawled over playing Legos,
nor is it the underbelly of the toad
that swam in our baths.
It is the Bing cherries flown from Chile
and saved for Christmas Day.
Puce is the tall rose in back, Lincoln variety.
It is hot grass seen after removing snow
goggles, or the Chicken Curry that ignited my
mouth. It is the lipstick that I wore called
Diva. My soccer jersey that bled on whites is
puce. The crust of blood on my knee. The stolen
pomegranate that stained me like Macbeth. Puce,
the sound it makes between teeth and tongue,
is green.

bookends

r. eirik ott

part one: serendipity in bidwell park

this journey began
with crisp fuji apples
and kiwi pepper jam
bought
with pocket change
from a parking lot farmers' market

drizzled by honey-sweet sun
from a sky too blue
for words,
we walked—no,
we traipsed—
through wooded parks
kicking oak balls
under fallen birch
snacking on wild miners lettuce
sharing chapstick and
singing songs
until our voices
went numb
and our cheeks
flushed cherub red
from smiling so hard

and later
beneath great aunt johnny's handmade quilt
we snuggled
entwined like
grape vines
caressing
each other's hands
our faces
our lips

and it felt so warm
and it felt so nice

more than anything
it felt
like our first few steps
together

part two: graduation day

our serendipity
didn't last
nearly as long as we had hoped

how could we go
from the warmth of hands held
stomachs trembling
at the thought
of our first embrace
and whispers
hoarse with passion
"i want us to be together for a long time"
to the cold static
of a long distance phone call
from four blocks away
"eirik, you're not the one."

we dove in
head first, eyes closed,
and sank straight to the bottom
so deeply
so quickly
never got the chance
to adjust
to the pressure
beginnings of true bliss
hardened
in the amber of silence
the death of conversation
of our walks through the park
making love
kissing
touching
until it was all gone

42 *Watershed*

the last time i saw her
she was so beautiful it hurt
and i almost melted away
i knew.

she knew.

when she left
i emptied my drawer in the bottom of her dresser
packed my toothpaste
my socks
my pillow

so much pressure
and tension
work, finals, graduation, family, the blur of tears
we never made it to summer time
the laughs we shared
over turkish delight and gyros
made us think of more long walks in the park
leaving the key in the door at the hotel at Disneyland
spooning
lucky charms
the warmth of her hands
but it was only the last fading ember
before summer
before graduation
before goodbye

the girl on the bus

r. eirik ott

she rides your bus every morning. sits in the very front, in the old people section.

she's pretty. knit gloves, corduroy jacket, sandals with thick socks. long light-red hair. young, maybe 19, 20. long and slender like a willow branch.

you don't know what color her eyes are, but she smiles your way almost every time she gets on the bus. it's a yes-we-ride-the-same-bus-and-i-see-you-every-morning smile, but it's friendly. she never shows her teeth when she smiles, but you bet they're straight. and white. you bet she smells like ivory soap and flowers, with a hint of patchouli oil.

she gets off two stops before you do, at the university, she and her backpack. she almost always pauses just before leaving, her hand curled around the silver rail along the wall, and flashes you a quick i'll-see-you-on-the-bus-tomorrow smile. then, she's gone.

you work during the day. the bus drops you off a few blocks from the restaurant. you're a cook. 8-3, weekdays. you don't talk to the other cooks much. you just listen to their music—their banda, their salsa, their cumbias—and fry and flip and mix and stir and scoop and hand the waitresses their orders on greasy plates. during the winter the owner overcompensates for the cold outside and turns up the heat. in the dining room it's nice, but in the kitchen, with the grill and the fryers and the ovens, it's miserable. in no time, you're sticky with sweat, greasy balls of warm moisture rolling down your back.

the orders are all the same, variations on a theme. eggs, bacon or sausage, hotcakes or toast, maybe a hamburger steak or a ham steak or a new york steak. you don't have to think about it much. your hands know what to do. your eyes, too, taking in exactly what is needed from the scribbled orders ripped from the waitresses' pads.

your mind wanders.

you wonder what she does. probably lives at home, in the same bedroom she's lived in forever. maybe she lives in an apartment with roommates, two to a room to cut

the rent in smaller pieces. maybe she lives on her own, with cats. tapestries and beaded things on the walls. a hand-me-down couch and love seat to match in the living room, a mattress on the floor in the bedroom. blue lights to replace the bright white ones. no television, but a nice birthday-present stereo. maybe she buys all her cds used.

does she work? maybe she's a counter girl at some shop. maybe she works at a clothing store. not an anti-septic mall store, but a funky clothing store downtown. maybe she works at the s.p.c.a., caring for animals, or at an old-folks home. maybe...

"...cheese on their eggs..."

marti's talking. she's 7-3 today, 3 tables in section 2 and 4 in 3. she's holding a plate at you, her arm sticking through the window between the kitchen and the dining room. you ask what kind of cheese, she says cheddar, and you grab a handful and sprinkle it on top of her 2-egg scramble.

"thanks." she smacks her gum and walks away.

you look at the clock on the wall. 10:30. an hour and a half before your fifteen-minute break. an hour and a half before you can wash some of this grease from your hands and face, before you can put your head under cold running water and pat your buzz-cut clean again. cleaner, anyway.

you get an order for a breakfast sandwich, no yolk. it's for liz, 10-4, section 5, by the bathrooms on the side. crack the egg, slop the yolk back and forth in the two halves of shell and let the clear white ooze into the metal "mason jar ring" on the grill that fries it in shape. open-faced english muffin half and a slice of american cheese. egg on top with a spatula. ladle the thick gravy, lumpy with sausage, but not too much. slide the plate of food onto the stainless steel shelf in the window, under the red heat lamp, with the order slip sticking from under the plate like a tongue. order up.

later, 3:15, and you're walking the eight blocks downtown to the university, the collar of your blue workshirt still wet from head-soaking. you're running a little late for your 3:30 class. child development, a general education class. you like to get there a bit early to

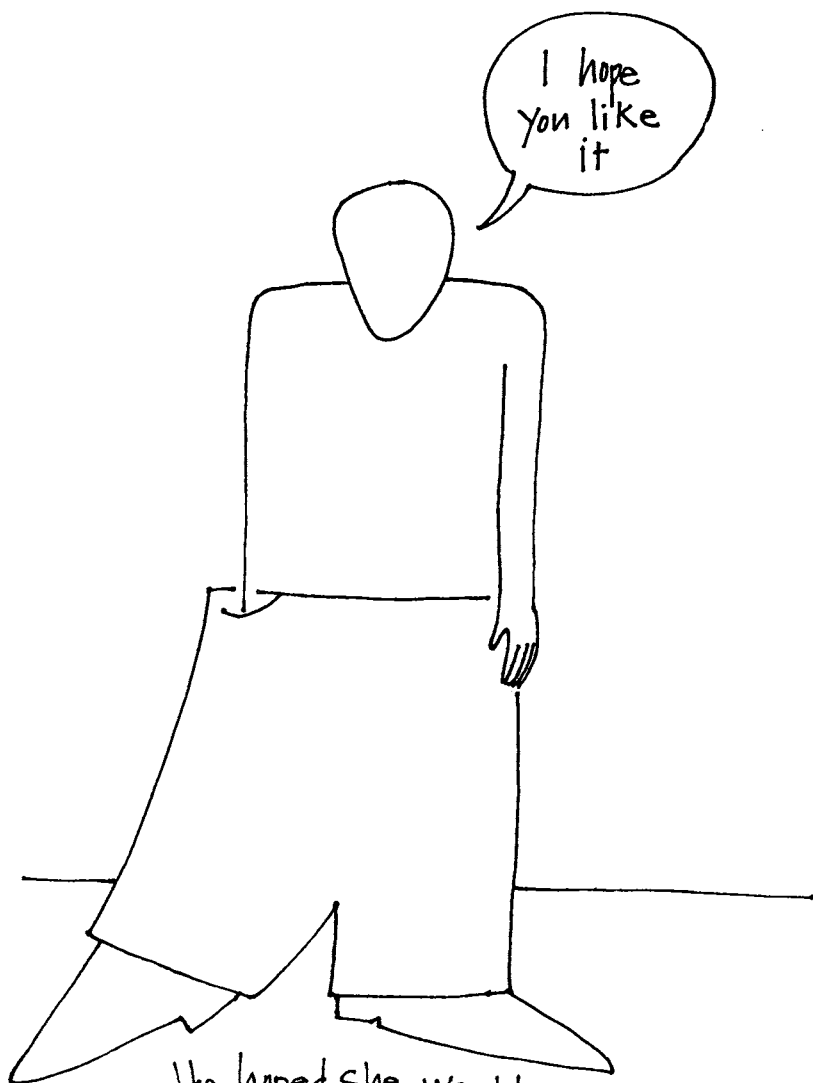
finish the reading you're usually behind on. plus, it allows you to sit in the very back, away from everyone. you're sure the sponge bath in the deep sink at work does little to hide the fry cook smell.

it's dark outside, and cold, by the time class ends. you walk to the bus stop two blocks away. get onto the bus. go home.

and you read. do homework. watch teevee. shower. go to sleep. in your single bed, wedged up against a wall under the window, you look up through the venetian blinds at the trees. at the trees. at the moon. at the stars.

the next morning is full of rain and cold. by the time the bus comes to your stop, you are soaked to the skin, shoes bleeding cold water and mud. you slosh over to your usual seat, in the middle, next to a window, and pull out a book from your dripping backpack.

two stops later, at her bus stop, only the two high school kids get on.



He hoped she would
enjoy it just the way it was
and not be compelled to "fix it"
when he wasn't looking...

Contributors

Heather Brittain Bergstrom is a junior at Chico State. She is originally from Washington but is currently in love with Northern California. She has been writing poetry for about three years and the biggest influences on her writing have been Anne Sexton, Sharon Olds, and Carole Oles.

Patricia Caspers is a graduate student at Chico State. She has good intentions and a great gift for procrastination. She lives by the words of Colette, "You will do foolish things, but do them with enthusiasm."

Jacqueline Devlin is a recent transfer to Chico State from Butte College. She is currently majoring in Psychology and minoring in Creative Writing. She has a passion for poetry that is a great challenge to subdue in order to meet the deadlines and responsibilities that are a necessary part of life.

Bob Garner is centrally located.

Catherine Goggia's work can be seen in *Women's Glib*, *What Is This Thing Called Sex*, and *The Best of Contemporary Women's Humor*, all published by the Crossing Press.

Laura Hall is a senior at Chico State, majoring in English and minoring in Creative Writing. In ten years she hopes to be queen of the world, or to at least own a dog.

Matt Helms is twenty-one and likes sponges and Santa Claus.

Sarah Hockman lives and writes in Chico, California.

Marc Horton, originally from Martinez, California, is a junior at Chico State, majoring in English and Anthropology. He loves writing fiction, poetry, and drama, but has not yet gotten the hang of the short biographical statement.

Debbie McCallum is a month shy of twenty-one and thus spends a lot of time alone while her friends are out drinking. She misses the ocean and fog of her home in Sebastopol, loves language and words and wants to teach others to love them as well.

Kristi Matson is a senior in the Liberal Studies program at Chico State. She wants to get an MFA in Creative Writing in the next five years. Her poetic influence came from Kate Dougherty, the mother of two second grade classmates, and a Mendocino poet. Her school had a printing press and the students made books of poetry and sold them to parents and friends.

Barbara Melton, still trying to earn her Wonder Woman wings, is busy doing the following: single parent of a nine-year-old boy, part-time teacher at Chico State, part-time teacher at Butte College, scriptwriter for VSA and full-time graduate student in the English Department.

Sean Murphy is twenty-three and a senior at Chico State. Along with cheese, he enjoys slamming his head into a brick wall, listening to the radio while a parachute is stuffed into his ear, and sucking the poisonous juice out of plants. He thinks writing poetry and fiction is easier than telling his ideas to everyone in town personally. That would take him way too long.

Marissa Nokes is originally from Huntington Beach, California. She is in her third year of a Humanities major at Chico State.

r. eirik ott is a contributing columnist for The Orion, managing editor of Impulse Magazine, and editor and founder of Thrust Magazine. He is very superstitious and never counts beyond 51. Ever.

Marilyn Ringer has been writing poetry since she was twelve, but has only given herself completely to the practice of poetry in the last three years. Her poem in this issue, "Still Life," was read in Katherine Waste's production "Chiaroscuro" last summer.

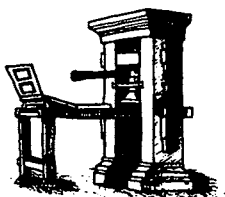
N.A. Stratton is close to graduation from Chico State in Journalism, after almost 30 years of trying. She started writing and taking photographs at ten, and after graduation plans to write for a living. She hopes her seventeen-year-old son will not have to wait as long as she did to realize his dreams.

Nancy Talley is a grandmother, crone, aging broad, and finally: one who writes poems.

Zu Vincent is a free lance writer and senior editor of *Expressions Magazine*.

Editors' Afterword

We would like to thank all the contributors who gave us the opportunity to read their work. We were thrilled by the challenge their talent created. Each piece chosen for this issue of *Watershed* provoked at least one editor to fight passionately for its inclusion. We hope you feel the emotion. Thanks to Ellen Walker for her knowledge, and for leading us further into the world of writers and editors.



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