

WATERSHED



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VOLUME 27, NUMBER 2

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Watershed

VOLUME 27, NUMBER 2
SPRING 2004

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Moving Into the Clear

Little clots of shadow,
I find them on nights I cannot sleep.
Some behind the credenza,
others in the pockets of the suit I keep for funerals,
or between the pages of the books that never leave the library.
Involutions of darkness, leaking meaning,
they disturb me,
so I sweep them into a pile,
then smear them, along with all the crumbs and dust,
across the fierce whiteness of the page.

Three Months

It has been three months.

Through December
poplars held their yellow leaves
in backyards
along the flat bus routes of Hayward

In calendars which have gone on sale
the date, the full moon, the metallic
cold of the night,
the first dawn of your absence
are not marked
nor the charisma
of the screen
above the bed
where your vital signs
pulsed and flagged
in swift green dots and digits

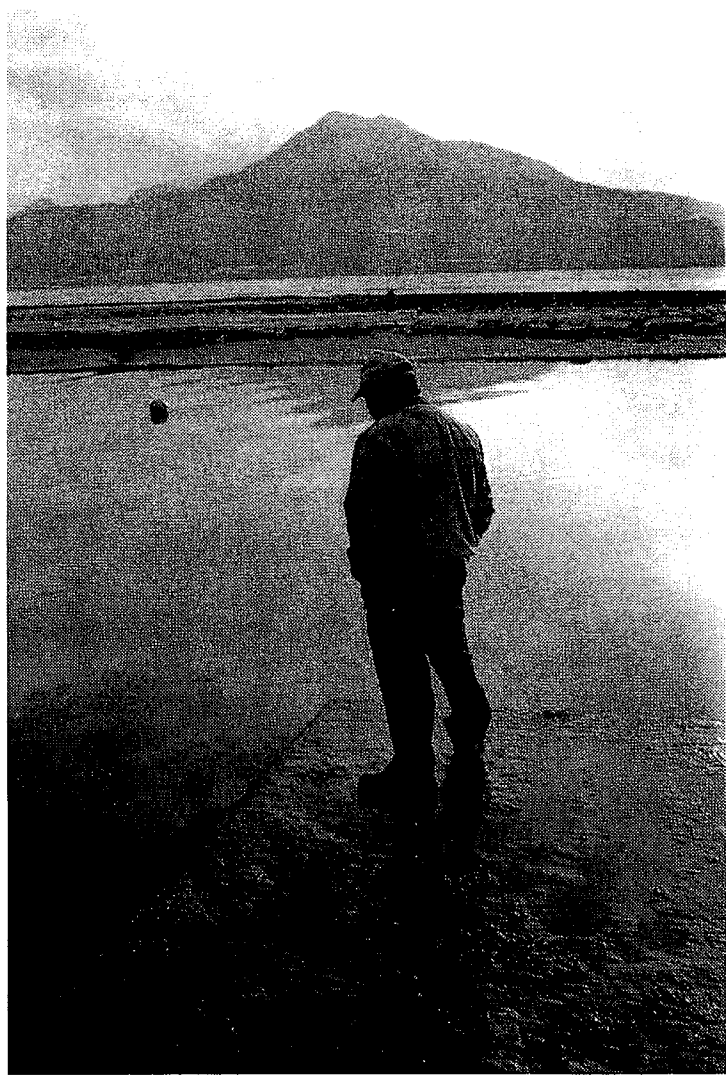
It is three months.

The world has traveled on foot
through enemy mountains,
on AC Transit past strip malls,
waited at stop lights
leaned on shopping carts
to cross a continent

In this house
of mourning
I have learned
to hold you
or release you
is a rhythm
beyond my hands
Your presence, a gift,
your loss, a wound,
are struck on the anvil

of a silence
I cannot overcome

There is mention of your name
among those most devoted
and there are the vowels of tears
which flow over the cheekbone
through canyon dirt and branches
into brittle scrub,
the silver flags of winter



Tamshui

Dustin J. Schwandt

The Loneliness of Li Bai

And he wrote for
loneliness, homesickness

"On the ground before my bed, is spread the bright moon light"

— Li Bai

His brush strokes were butterfly's feet

as cool jasmine was carried

by the thrum of dragonflies.

Their wings, the soft grating

of er-fu vibrating their two strings.

the dragonflies

musical instrument

Li Bai had wandered for years

from those sounds of the southern province.

A path curved in its stroke away from Szechwan

straight to the bed of homesickness

that would be his poem.

Was it how the moon struck him that night

so he wrote, *Di tou si gu xiang*,

the snow of his loneliness

shattering with each crystal flake?

the snow of his loneliness
shattering

Or had he lifted his brush to empty night

and painted the moon in beaded ink;

his brush strokes falling to paper

from the stars that suddenly winked?

no?

he saw a brightness in the "empty night"

Image cluster:

(*Head bent, I ease down, thinking of home.)

Gift of Discernment

Brown eyes, no matter how you look at them, they're just blah and flat. Unless they have gold flecks. Now gold-flecked eyes, I could probably live with that. However, you just can't read people with brown eyes, because you can't see their essence.

I would pick a man with green eyes, that being my favorite color and all. Blue eyes, if dark, are magnetic like the night sky when you're a kid lying on the driveway with your dad. Light blues are ethereal and untouchable. Then there's also an in-between charcoal blue, expansive and watery like the wide eyes of our kittens. They wobble, staring emptily, barely tracking our movement. I've heard that all kittens and babies have blue eyes, the starter color before a soul settles in.

His are green. I can see his spirit through, to the depth of his deception. Right there in the back of those hazel eyes, behind the gold and between that dark green rim—the lies nestle, like baby birds hiding underneath momma's wing.

Pretty much that's what I think he's doing, hiding behind fabrications, taking comfort in the fact that my blue eyes absorb; they don't reflect his dishonesty.

He's asking me what I'm thinking. I hear those words, but I don't want to answer yet, I'm studying the latest untruth.

There's money missing from my wallet. Forty dollars, maybe sixty. Not a lot, but enough to know it's gone. Enough to pay the unforgiving electric bill. Enough to buy dinner at Olaph's. Enough for a long overdue haircut and dye.

Around his tiny pupils is a mossy green section, but I watch the bronze hazy part, just inside of the forest green rim. He's repeating himself. He's loaded again. I know it, he knows it, but he doesn't know I know it.

He's saying something about bottle feeding the kittens this morning, but I'm watching the red veins. They spread out from the iris, teeny arms reaching for hope. He has taken terrific care of the kittens, dropping the saline solution into their barely opened eyes, bathing their matted milky fur, rubbing their little bottoms until they poop into a warm wet towel, and congratulating them when they do so. He's nurturing, kind, and loaded.

And where's my money?

If I ask where the pills came from, he'll say, "What? I'm not on any-

thing, hey don't you believe me?" He'll divert the subject toward trust, and wind it in the direction of how much he loves me, then whirl it over to a confession, and finally turn it upside down into a sobbing apology. I'll forgive him and we'll make love after his promises.

His eyelashes flicker slowly as he contemplates my tranquility.

I sigh. If only he had brown eyes, I wouldn't be able to read his core. Instead, I'd just play with the kittens and marvel at their minuscule faces as they paw the bottle, gazing up at me with trust, while drinking their warm milk.

for gudrun boesen

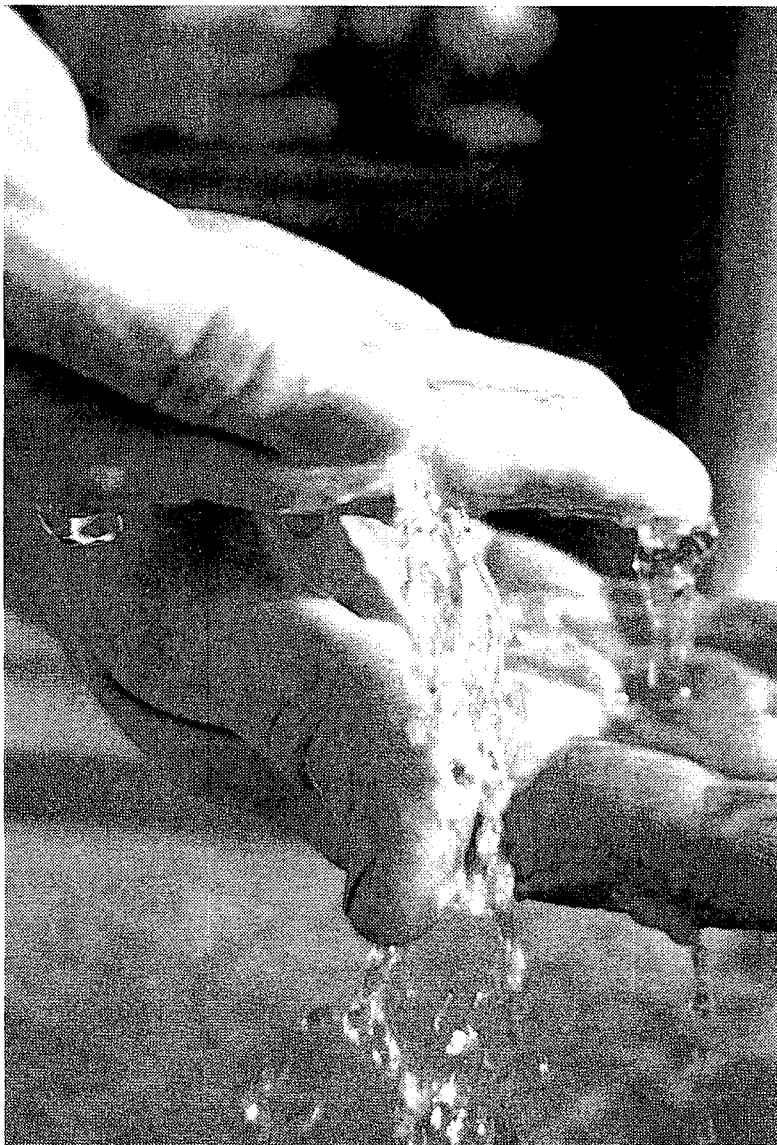
her hands were wide,
her hands were ancient, graceful
and smooth. the hands of one who knows
steady motion, like wave touching wave,
and the delicate dance of butterflies
perched on milky dandelion.

i caught them in the field behind her house,
and she would name them for me—
queen monarch, red admiral—
in a heavy accent that sounded like marbles
on stairs, each syllable rolling delicately
to the edge, then dropping,
fast and polished
to the next.

when she taught me
to pull thread through stretched fabric,
spelling, in burgundy, my best friend's name
on a cream doily, when she taught me this
she was polished and proper
like a danish antique—timeless,
ageless, stern beauty of strength.

i was terrified when she would look at me,
paying much attention to the evenness of the lace
around the cuff of my sock;
retying the multitude of bows my mother
would attach to me each morning—
in frizzy pigtails, on shiny shoes
or the back of my dress.

she would fix me
like she was arranging flowers
in a vase, fidgeting for perfection
when, like the violets and daisies
that she kept on a sunny table,
i only wished to be returned to the field
where she found me, with the clover
and the monarchs.



Taunia and Ed Miller

Dustin J. Schwandt

I Press My Hands

kitchen-sitting,
I press my hands against my chest to keep my heart
from exploding out,
like a bomb flowering open, fireworks
splattering purple-red gobbets of blood-love everywhere;
I must look away from the man in the blue and white ticking apron,
thin body slimmed by vertical stripes;

he turns from the sink,
a bowl in his hand sudsing the floor,
ponders my offhand question
about mediterranean fish.

(american legacy: we expect to do
and have anything we please.
yet who of us is satisfied?)

I have discovered love; I will not give it up.)

I tell him,
or rather, try to tell him,
how much, how
much, I love him.

he cries, of course. he is a man
of my generation; tears are not difficult or shameful.
his eyes are tigris and euphrates
silting his face and mine;
his harvest: invariably
I comfort him out of his tears.

(you're thinking: that's not love,
it's doomed and true love is never doomed;
but he does love me. he won't let me leave him.
he won't let me love him.)

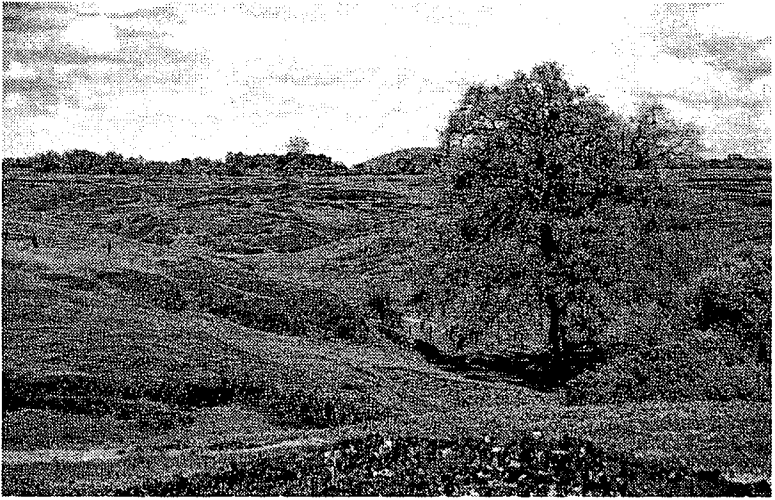
when we were still enraptured with each other's faces,
I told him I knew just what he'd look like at forty.
what ecstasy of confidence,

knowing I'd watch twenty years etch themselves on his face.
now there is no knowing.

I sit in the kitchen,
 pressing my hands against my chest
 to keep my heart
from splattering purple-red gobbets of blood-love onto
 a blue and white striped apron.

Pocket-sized Religion

This vestige and keepsake from the Saint Maria gift-shop
Is a small embodiment of faith I inherited;
My dogma living in a pint-sized plastic body,
She hides my fears in the folds of her powder-blue robe,
And kindly encourages my self-esteem to seek refuge within
The mini cotton-candy pink plastic cloud she floats on for eternity.
My beloved Fatima commiserates and covets my heartache,
She hears me with a compassionate ear through her stare,
While the gilded glitter ribbons decorating her robe
Rub off as my fidgety fingers massage pitiful prayers.
This empathetic emblem I would exultantly trade
To resurrect my mother cremated just as the daffodils sprang.



Vernal Textures

René Suzanne Muir

To My Friend, the Thistle

You stood tall in your sturdy frame
This life was once your springtime
And though you worried that forbearance
Would ever anchor you to know—it could not
You lived on. Long after the radiance
Of your youth did end, however deep the impression lasted
It is not collapsed
But preserved in your blood, your skin
Your bones but not your mind.
That long slender stalk served you well
When you tested youth against the uncertainty of changing times
Against the certainty of changing time.
And that crown of dried out thorns—
Those prickly tubercles of repetitive
Churchyard blooming
Those that pointed one way and those that gave to another
Those too now fall away
For you are old and with a crooked smile
Beside the fire in winter—long after your bloom
You remember, old one
What your skin tried to teach the youngest
Of your rebellious years.
How many fingers did you prick? How many times
Did you draw blood?
And how many times did you inspire scorn at man
With all his follies?
Like those waning embers your life is so
Without teeth you are, without pricks or scorn.
And do you wish you still had those lessons learned
In blooming churchyard air
However false you proved them to be?
That love from the past is not lost
This you now know—this you now see
In your dying hour
In your hour of immortality.

My Mother's Beads

Small boxes of your beads
sit before me; yellow-striped
African and deep turquoise,
amber-orange sunsets,
blue-painted intricate tiles,
glittering snow crystals,
opal clouds turning
from blue to green to white,
silver and gold bangles,
buttons, balls, fish, bells,
an elephant—each collected
in inch long compartments,
a myriad of gatherings
so typical of you.

“Never place even numbered
things together—pictures or baskets,
always in odd numbered combinations.”
“Just a little off center.”
“Mix, don’t match.”

So I gather from your gatherings,
a blue bead here,
then contrasting colors:
yellow and green,
red and orange,
green and purple,
hoping to recreate
your singular stride and voice.

Last August we found
your paintings bound
in cloth and closeted,
poems in your flared,
unreadable handwriting
buried with your papers
in a small tapestry notebook.
And pottery—glazed bodies,
unusual masks of exaggerated

faces, mostly of women.
Then we boxed your possessions,
divided your jewelry,
discarded your old clothes,
and burned you down
to the heavy ash of bone.

Tonight I turn these beads
slowly in my palm,
the color combinations
a blending of contrasts
to reconstruct you,
to know you now
more easily in memory.
A simple glittering bead,
paintings in my closet,
the picture of you and me
together by my bed,
toes pointed out, side by side,
dresses gathered above our knees,
below photo-posed smiles.
No failed last visit,
just death and good luck,
our final collision unrealized.

The Undiscovered Museum

On the shelf
he has gathered all the lamps in the house:
two classic kerosene lanterns from their days in the forest
 with bulbous bases, curvaceous chimneys,
the old doctor's alcohol lamp of bubbled glass,
a verdigris storm lantern with thick, white candle inside,
the Japanese *yukimi-gata* bringing the garden inside,
one long green candle in a brass holder with finger loop to carry,
a second in a heavy glass base.
With the family gone and darkness growing,
he lights them all, and a coil of incense before them.
He sits by the open window,
listening to the fountain outside,
 watching sunlight fade,
 candles flutter,
 smoke curl,
 and his own dissolve into darkness.

Imperial Music (From a dream)

Two men stand
In a room strangled by silence.
They shuffle their feet,
Swallow recycled saliva
And wait.
Loud music erupts,
Colonizes the air,
Pours through the walls
Like floodwaters.
The men's eyes
Do a nervous jitterbug.
"I guess they're calling us,"
One of them says.
Head at half mast,
He walks slowly toward the door.
The other man takes a deep breath,
Pulls a flute from his back pocket
And weaves a garment of sound
That fits him like a cloak
Against the imperial music
Invading his eardrums,
Tugging at his body
And summoning him to
Walk out the door.

Cleft Wings

Foggy windows set in gray desolation.
Dusty, rusted moisture, dry and tarnished from neglect.
Transparent turned opaque eyes close locked with dark, subtle solitude.
The face looking out is shadowed with aged, tiresome and distant grace.

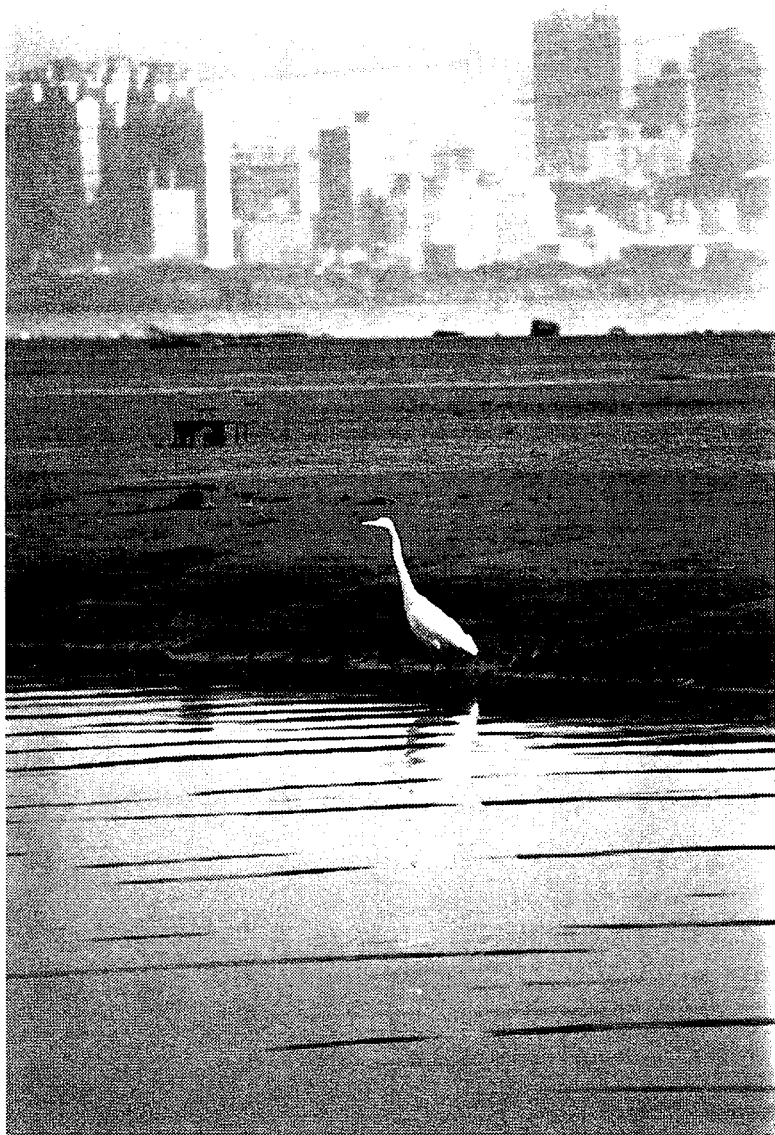
Air is sharp with the piercing screams of lost innocence,
Shattered glass, broken images of the past.
All motion has stilled and grown cold.
Breath is short.
Memories lost to an hourglass run out.

A white dove lay shallow within a lucid, moonlit stream weighed down
by her cleft wings.
A single white feather lay motionless upon the sill—suspended in her fall.

A dim flame lay lit upon a candle, wax dripping with black and white
reminiscence.
Her face is blurred beneath the layer of drifting smoke,
Tired by the distant wind beneath its wings.

Eyelids sunk with an inward gaze of desperation creased with dry tears
Lay crusted with dusts of distant dreams.
A pale green and shivered ice-silver glazed perception grows empty.
A thorn rips upon a rose's petaled grace.
Slivers of fading photographs lay scattered among the sill.

The icy reflection of her eyes stares out into a world left desolate
with time,
Among souls lost within a haze of mere existence.



Outside Taipei

Dustin J. Schwindt

Boxed Bird

It was a Sunday when I saw it. A blue jay, wing flopping to the side, sitting on the ground in the middle of a cross-walk squawking its pretty little head off. I was on my way to the church, just across the street. I was late, as usual, and I didn't really have time to be standing around gawking at a hurt bird. My mama was across the street already waiting for me on the church steps. She was chatting up Mr. Udal, the man responsible for us going to the church in the first place. About two years ago, when my daddy died, Mr. Udal came to take up where my daddy left off. He ain't married my mama or nothing, but he visits regular and he looks out for our souls. So my mama says.

I looked at that bird again and I noticed something. About three or four birds sitting on the telephone wire overhead were having their way with it. One or two would swoop down, peck at the hurt one and then swoop back up again. I couldn't take that. I looked around me for something to scoop the bird up with. I heard birds have lice—I didn't want none of that. Then one of those other blue jays dove straight down and pecked that hurt one on the head so hard it made the hurt one's eyes close from the pain of it. That's when I made my decision. I ran over and waved my hands in the air.

"Hey!"

The hurt blue jay tried to get up when I got close, but it couldn't go nowhere. I scooped it up in my hands and pulled it to my chest to keep it warm like a baby bird under its mama's tummy. That little bird squawked like it was going to be eaten.

I covered that hurt bird's head, thinking that would calm it some. I could feel its heart beating so fast, like a little engine on high. I looked over at my mama then, still standing next to Mr. Udal on those church steps across the street. She'd seen what I'd done and the look on her face was like a sledgehammer coming down on steel. I thought it was because I was making her late.

My daddy was a man of his word. When he said something you knew it was true or gonna be. Once, when he said the sky was going to burst out with light at night, there was a meteor shower, I swear to God. My daddy wasn't religious, nor did he intend to be. My mama rode him about how we should think of going to church, but he would

have none of it.

"Church is therapy for the masses, Caroline," he'd say to Mama over the supper table. "I get all the therapy I need right here."

Mama's face would screw up, all indignant. "You don't get no therapy here at home. You don't go to see no psychologist. You could use some church therapy, Charles, and I aim to see you get it sometime."

Daddy would smile at Mama then. He had the kind of smile that would melt ice cream in the snow. "Well, then, I'm a poor man, and what's a poor man got to spend but his time? I aim to spend it as I please, not how somebody else thinks I should."

Mama stormed out of the room at that. She didn't have no response that time. She was fond of storming out. One thing my daddy made sure of was I didn't have to go to church either.

I carried that blue jay over to the church steps.

"What you got there, Thula?" Mama asked me. She scowled like I was sinning right in front of her.

"Hurt bird."

Mama opened up her leather clutch and pulled out a cotton hankie. She held it out to me so the cloth was closest and her fingers farthest.

"For goodness sake, girl, wrap this around it. You don't know how dirty that bird is."

I did as she asked. The blue jay squawked a bit but otherwise it held pretty still. I looked down at its dark black eyes. They stared back at me a second, the bird's head was cocked sideways-like. I wondered what it was thinking.

"I hope you aim to put that bird down somewhere," Mama said.

I looked up and saw Mr. Udal staring at me disdainful like. He's good at that, but he tries and hide it from Mama. I'm the one usually catches those looks.

"You ought to put that bird in a box, Thula. That's what the animal folks would tell you. Put it in a box and let it rest to see if it can get better," he said.

I nodded my head. There was something truthful about that. A box.

"Where can I find a box around here?"

Mama practically stamped her feet. The church bells began to chime, almost simultaneously.

"I'm going in, Thula. You best get yourself inside here soon as possible."

Mama turned and walked away, on into the church. Her disapproval was enough to get me to do what she wanted most times. It's like a constant blowtorch held to the base of my neck, burning in through the skin

so I can feel the pain all up and down my spine and nerves—direct to the source.

I looked at Mr. Udal before he turned to follow Mama inside. He shrugged, gave another disdainful look, and was gone. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't leave the bird out there to be attacked. Mr. Udal said I should get a box. I guessed that's what I would do.

I walked around back of the church to the meeting hall. The meeting hall belongs to the church, and all the church functions are held there. Christmas play, Lenten dinners, you name it. I opened the heavy metal door with one hand and walked in. The lights were off. I guessed the ladies that set up the after-church snacks hadn't arrived yet. I peered behind a cabinet or two, but there was nothing like a box there.

The bird sat real still in my hand and I looked down to make sure it was still alive. Its little chest rose and fell about a million times a second. It reminded me of a sick kid I saw once. My neighbor, Jimmy. He was bad off. I went with my mama—I was about eight then—to take some soup over to Jimmy and his family. Jimmy lay on the couch in his living room, brown chest sticking out over the top of a thin sheet that covered the rest of him. His chest just trembled and shook like he'd just finished running. I wanted to ask Mama about it, but I knew it wasn't polite. Jimmy never did get better. He died a month or two after that. He had scarlet fever, Mama said. His parents wouldn't take him to see no doctor, neither. They had the money, it was just their belief not to go to doctors when sick. Mama said it was our Christian duty to help people, no matter what their beliefs. I still think about Jimmy sometimes. I wondered if he wished his mama had taken him to the doctor.

I looked behind the kitchen counter. The kitchen was for people to do their cooking or warming of foods for all the events that take place there. I saw some brown cardboard stacked up between the fridge and the wall. I pulled one of the pieces out. It was a moving box that had been taken apart. I set the bird down real gentle on the floor and folded the cardboard back into a box shape. I had to kind of bend and ease the last flap's corner in so that the four flaps were all interwoven-like, to make the bottom. I turned the box right side up and put that blue jay inside. I took one last look at it—it was still alive, that's for sure—and then closed the top so it'd be dark.

Daddy used to say to me, "Thula, you get yourself an education girl, and you'll be free. Don't never depend on no man for your support.

You hear?" Of course I'd heard him and I'd say so. Daddy was always making statements like that. He called it "Thula's education" and I guess it was his own version.

Once he told me, "Don't marry no short man, Thula. Short men got the short man's complex." I asked him what exactly was a "short man's complex." Daddy said it was a psychological condition that some men can get into if they're short. Like they don't measure up.

Another time he told me, "Always challenge authority, girl. Don't never let anyone tell you what to think." After he died I recalled these things and I thought, if I get my education, marry a tall man, or don't marry at all, and then think for myself, I guess I'll be okay. Only things weren't okay, of course, because I missed Daddy. I wondered what he would do with a blue jay in a box.

I took the box and the blue jay and sat outside on this bench just next to the church meeting hall. I sat there looking around, listening to the blue jay's little claws scratching around inside on the cardboard. I wondered what it was doing. I figured it best to leave the box closed and not look—figured that'd probably just disturb it more, like make it think I might eat it. I tried to ignore the scritch, scritch, of those little claws. There was something disturbing about it. Like somebody trying to dig their way out of a grave.

I tried thinking about Mr. Udal. I thought about how he'd be spending the afternoon at our house drinking tea and whatnot. I wondered what he and Mama would do when I left home someday. Maybe he'd move in. Maybe he'd marry her. Maybe they'd just keep on like they were and nothing would change. I wondered if Mama would miss me when I was gone.

Then I wondered if I'd miss her. It was hard to imagine. Mama was all right, but she wasn't Daddy. On Sundays when she'd go to church with her friends, he'd make me French toast, or buttermilk pancakes and we'd sit and read the comics all morning while eating our food. We'd hold up our favorite strips for each other, reading them out loud. We might take a walk if it were sunny. We'd wave to the neighbors—Daddy would stop and talk, but never for too long. We'd walk to the edge of town sometimes, just to see the fields stretch out past all those run-down houses with cracks in the windows. We'd stand there then, looking out, and Daddy would put his arm around me.

"There's a whole world out there past that grass, Thula." I'd nod my head, waiting for him to go on. "Someday you go out there and see what there is to see." I'd strain my eyes to see what I could from there, but the black pavement of the road and the dirt and the grass stretched pretty

far, to the edge of the horizon. We'd keep looking at it a few minutes longer. Then we always turned around and walked back into town, back to our house. Before we turned Daddy would heave a sigh, just a small one, and I would wonder what exactly he thought was beyond all the grass, just over the horizon.

The blue jay was really going for it, making all sorts of noises in that box. I was trying my level best to not be looking at it all the time, but I decided I had to give it a peek. I opened one flap of the box lid slowly, and I couldn't see the bird. My eyes adjusted a bit to the darkness and then I saw it, dead center of the box. Only it wasn't the head I saw it was the feet, up in the air, clawing at the bottom of the box occasionally. The blue jay's head was stuck down through the bottom flaps and its injured wing stuck up in the air like a sail of a ship. It was trying to get out of that box. I couldn't blame it. But I was afraid it was gonna injure itself more. I reached down into the box, wrapped my fingers around the bird and pulled it back into the box. Its neck feathers were all ruffled from the effort, and it looked none too happy to be looking at me again.

"Come on little bird. You gotta get better. Just rest now." I set it back down inside and closed the lid back up. It didn't make no more scratching noises. I guess it realized the bottom of the box was no way out. I felt my hands and arms trembling a bit. I realized I felt responsible for that bird. By picking it back up and placing it upright in the box I'd taken a chance of injuring it more.

Daddy died of lung cancer. He wasn't no smoker, neither, he just got bad lungs from something in 'em. Doctor said probably was the mining work he'd done when he was younger. There are things in some of those mines, the doctor said, that will coat a man's lungs and turn 'em black. Well I guess one of those things must have coated Daddy's lungs, because that's what killed him. Blackness in the lungs. It got harder for him to talk, but up until the end, he was telling me things, sometimes even writing them down. My daddy had a lot to tell me. He wanted to make sure I knew what he had to say. I'd sponge him off when he got hot. Otherwise the sweat would just trickle down his forehead. If Mama or I weren't there to catch it, it would drip down his neck, soaking his shirt. Mama would make me go outside and be with my friends after a bit. She said it wasn't right for a child to see too much suffering. Daddy'd smile and shoosh me off by waving his hands. Outside things weren't much better. I didn't feel like playing or seeing friends. Everywhere I

looked I thought I saw the black in things.

Mr. Udal says I should go to college someday. Mama shushed him, but she got a little smile when he said it. He was Mama's friend before Daddy died, but he went to another church, the one we go to now. It's Presbyterian. The one Mama went to before was Baptist. She says it don't matter none what the church is called, long as they worship God. Anyway, Mr. Udal came around more after Daddy died. He was there to wish him well before he died too. But just once or twice. A month or so after Daddy was buried Mr. Udal came over on a hot Saturday afternoon and sat on the front porch drinking iced tea. I sat on the steps while Mama sat in a chair, like Mr. Udal.

"You should think about coming to my church with me tomorrow, Caroline. You and Thula."

Mama was quiet at first. I didn't like the way he tacked me on at the end, like a necessary evil.

"I suppose I could try it. Haven't been to your church before. Not sure I could follow along." Mama took a drink from her iced tea. I looked back over my shoulder as she did and I saw a smile on her face. We went to Mr. Udal's church the next day. I went mostly for curiosity. Then, with Daddy gone, Mama started expecting me to go with her and Mr. Udal to the church every Sunday. Daddy would've approved of me going once I think—if nothing else except for scientific reasons. I know for a fact he would've disapproved of all the time. The easiest thing seemed to be to go along—that blowtorch of Mama's can be pretty painful.

The voices of the congregation were singing "Onward Christian Soldiers." The sun was shining even stronger. It shone down on the patch of grass and purple sage growing between where I sat and the church, lighting up the green like it was some resurrected bit of life. Except for the patches of crabgrass it would've been beautiful. Easter wouldn't be far off now. The voices swelled and rose outside the church walls like a flock of birds swooping and darting in the air. I could almost see the voices swirling around in front of me, beckoning to me like some ghost of my ancestors.

I opened the box to check on the bird again. I could just make out the bird. It was on its side, not moving, little claw feet curled up and bent in the air. Its eyes were closed, squeezed shut like it couldn't bear to look upon life anymore. I stared at that bird a long time, willing it to live, just hoping to see that blue-feathered chest rise with life again.

When someone or something dies you have all sorts of thoughts that run through your head, whether it be a person or an animal. I

found myself thinking of Daddy and Jimmy. I looked at that bird with its closed eyes and beak facing the cardboard wall. I wondered for a long time if it weren't staring at the walls of that box that finally killed it.

When I did look up I saw Mama standing in front of me. I still could hear the singing, so I figured she'd come out especially to see what I was doing.

"You're not coming in I take it?" she asked.

I shook my head 'no'.

"What about that bird?"

I saw her glance toward the box, but I could tell she couldn't see the bird from where she stood. She could have stepped forward to look. But she didn't.

"Bird's dead."

She nodded her head like she'd expected my answer, like she knew everything already, and it was plain as day how things were going to be.

"Best get yourself into the church then. Your father's not here any more, Thula. It's time you try and think about religion some. Time you think about belonging to something. Don't do like he did and think you know everything."

She waited for my answer, but I didn't have one for her. Mama finally turned and walked back into the church without once looking back at me over her shoulder. Part of me thought there was sense in what she said, but I could feel in my heart that there was just no belonging for me. Not anymore.

I stood up, and I walked home with the bird in my hands. Its body got cooler to the touch as I went. I thought maybe I'd bury it in our backyard, give it someplace to rest and be taken back into life again by the worms it used to eat. I found a small hand shovel. One that Mama used for gardening. I took it and the bird to the back yard, but there didn't seem no place that would be just right. I walked around, thinking what to do with it. I thought about Daddy, and what he would do. Then it came to me.

I decided to walk down that same road my Daddy and I used to—the last time was just a few months before he died. He'd had his arm around my shoulders, leaning on me to help him. He could barely talk then. We stopped and looked together at that horizon for a long time.

I walked clear to the edge of town carrying that bird. When I got to the place me and Daddy'd stop, I kept going, farther, to that place

we'd looked at—the next rise of the hill. I kneeled down at the edge of the grassy field, near the edge of the road and dug a small, deep hole. I dug it deep as I could, maybe a foot or so. I buried that bird; and I shoveled the brown dirt on top of its blue-gray body. The last thing I saw of it were its eyes squeezed shut. When I was done there was a mound of brown mud that I figured would cover up with grass by next year. I stood up and looked around. I looked back to where I'd stood with Daddy that last time.

There was something awful in that horizon—it caught in my throat, like a cork. I closed my eyes and wished so hard that Daddy was there. I wished Jimmy and the bird, my mama and even Mr. Udal could all be next to me. I wished so hard I thought maybe it'd come true. I took a deep breath and opened my eyes. I turned to look at the next hill, farther from town, the next stop to the horizon. It looked exactly the same as everything else. I knew then in my heart that Daddy would stay gone and that I would always remain on the outside of everything. I knew that with the sureness that I'd just buried the bird. I knew that and yet I managed a smile anyway.

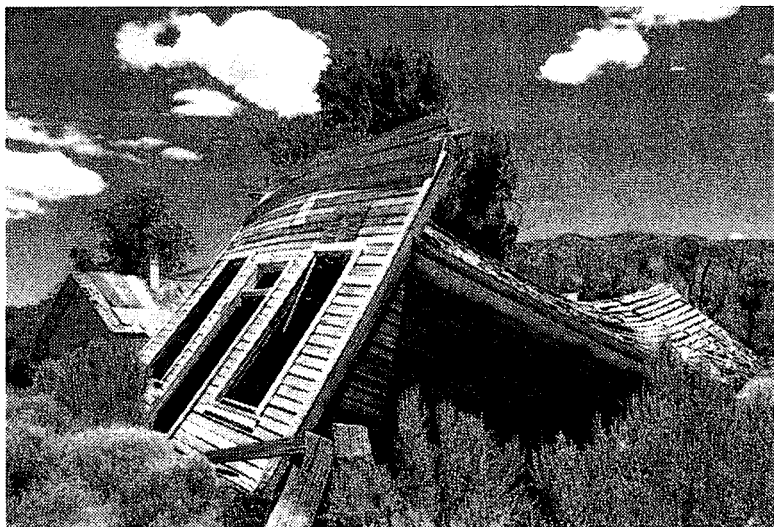
Anne of the Thirty Days

Eyes closed still traumatized from nail to nail
and you lie there a perfect dysfunctional
and the dark cabin roof is close overhead
and your hands smell of her smell
and your body smells of her gift
and your neurosensors reel without pattern
and her mouth is still on you though she has gone
and your lips are dry with all this remembrance.

And the first raindrops sound on the cabin roof
and then come the many others
and soon it is a swelling
and now you can smell it also
and hear the flowing from deck to harbor
and the jagged explosion of a close one illuminates all
and violent thunder crashes through the open portholes
and finally you sleep trauma done tempest gone.

And a new morning comes on with Grecian clarity
and you can smell that as well
and disassembled clouds drift on a field of blue
and tall adobe bluffs hint at something green
and her college is nestled up there in pure white stucco
and the girl of the smell stands with her books watching
and pert nipples roll as she descends for the rest of you.

And now Benny intrudes with his Sandspit Café
and the prevailing wind finds the open portholes
and the perfect torture of home-fries bacon eggs and coffee
and the watching girl is momentarily forgotten
and yet you need to be aware young sailor
she means to be the instrument of your certain shipwreck.



Untitled

Dustin J. Schwindt

Unpainted Fence

This fence after rain
as it dries in sun
reveals grain's rough edges
knots and notches.
Dark patches still damp
shadow map-like contours
a wealth of shapes
beauty less predictable
than uniform white
suggesting depths deeper
than wood itself.

Dysfunctionality

We snag each other with barbed hooks,
each word a lethal weapon, each gesture
an implement of violence,
each glance a lancing blow.
We sentence each other
to the gas chamber,
pour noxious fumes around each other
with each
puff
of air.

We order each other into exile,
with each vile thought we wrap around
the other, the one supposedly “friend” and “lover”—
we cower beneath a cover of darkness
so pervasive
we will never get out.

We split in half
with each invisible hatchet thrown,
each word flung
through our meagerness,
our absence.
We pitifully stand as stumps of trees,
butchered carelessly
in greedy desire.
We burn, burn as fire,
searing each other
as flames
burn
all that stands in their path.

Five Years

so close
I could distinguish your tears
 from mine
 only by taste

years of twisting tight
 together then
of uncoiling
 standing round-
 eyed and open-handed
but snugly back
 to back

forward stepping now
I feel your vertebrae intaglio
 chiseled in my flesh and
wonder if likewise
 my spine furrowed
 you.

Last Night Was Great

Touch me, touch me, touch me
Breathe me in
Take me in
I am all yours
To behold, to betray
To leave stranded on the side
 Of that dusty road
Use me, abuse me
Take me for all I'm worth
A worth of nothing
I am worth nothing
I am only worth what you
 Will take me for
I am worth what you
 Don't say
Don't do, don't see
 In me
Broken and cracked
 Into pieces
I lay on your bedroom floor
Staring into the abyss
 Of your ceiling
Bloodshot eyes
Shaking hands
Overwhelmed mind
Thoughts astray
Take me, take me, take me
For yours
Searching for heart
Falling short of clock
Your buttoned shirt
Draped over the chair
In between the space
Of my sanity
And regret
And shame
Stuck with a push pin

To your cork board

Your "To Do" list

Place me there

Place me there

Place me there

After

PICK UP CHECK

BUY STAMPS

RETURN BOOKS

Place me here

Place me here

Place me here

I don't mind

I don't mind

I do mind

- I want to mind

I need my mind

To straighten out

Need to breathe

Need to step back

Need to realize the stakes

My only comfort

Take a break

Take a break

Take a break

Can't stop

Continual cycle

Summer jumps to winter

- And back again

To your arms

To your eyes

To the way you look

At me

Used up inside

Worn penny (worn down)/worn (to the extent of existence)

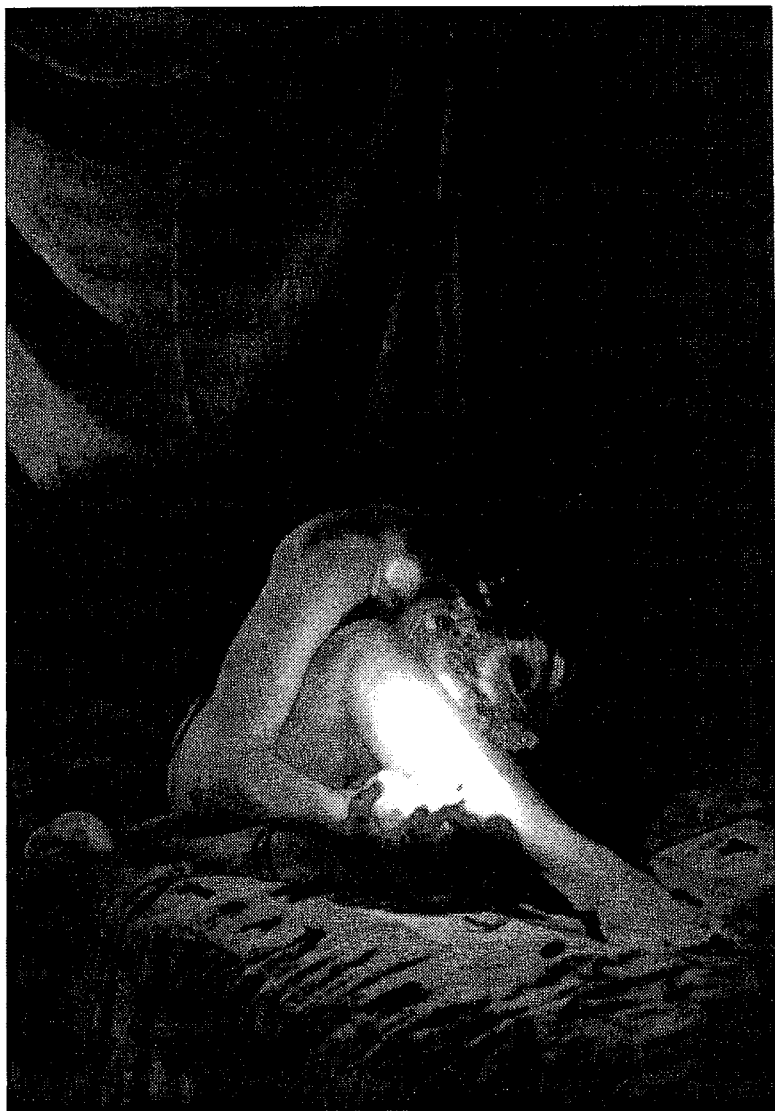
to a place I don't want to go—to a time and a way out of here:

I want to leave I want to leave I want to leave I want to leave I want to leave

Buy

Self-
Awareness

How big, long
contributes to rigor of feeling



Untitled

Miranda Larsen

Fog

I can't remember a time I existed outside the fog. When my friend visits, things are clearer. Oh, my friend. She is so wonderful. How long has it been since her last visit? Too long I suppose. I can hardly remember what she looks like, it's been so long. The fog gets thicker the longer she is away. When she visits, the fog dissipates.

Sometimes I have these fantasies that I am locked away inside a cloud-room. Everything around me is so soft and white. There is a door at one end of the cloud-room in which a solitary window sits like an ever-watchful eye. This eye scares me sometimes. I can see it winking at me, as if it holds some dark and terrible secret. But, it is merely a window and what is outside it, I do not know. In one corner of this cloud-like room, there is a bed. It is a small, metal bed with long brown things, they look like snakes with metal teeth, protruding from underneath it. I stay away from the bed for fear that it will wrap its coils around me then bite me with venomous needles guided by bodiless hands with strange, echoing voices.

When I find myself locked in this fantasy, it is difficult for me to wake myself up, or to at least go back into the fog that I am accustomed to. Like a lost child, I huddle in the corner farthest away from the bed, and out of sight of the ominous window. I curl up facing the corner with my arms around my head and ears and chant to myself, "please come, please come, please come." I beg my friend to visit me, to let me out of this isolation. Or, I at least wish for the fog to envelop me in its misty forgetfulness.

Oh, when is she going to be here again? I hate being alone in this place. The fog is okay. I don't mind being alone in the fog, but I don't like being alone in this fantasy. When my friend visits me, the fantasy dissipates, and my reality consumes me. When I try to think about what is real, I get confused, and a strange headache prevents my thoughts from coming through clearly. Strangely enough, the only thing I am able to think about during these moments of agony is the cloud-room, with all that soft padding along the walls. I can't seem to remember anything else. But it can't be real. I can't imagine that such a place would exist, or that I would be in such a place.

When I try to remember the things my friend and I do together, I can't. A darkness comes up in my mind, thick with unknowing, and I can't get past the wall surrounding my memories. I know my friend

exists. I can remember every detail about her: red curly hair flowing over shoulders smooth and white, black eyes that hold my truth, the body that has never gone through pregnancy; however, I can't seem to remember anything that she has said to me, or places we have gone to. All I can remember is the feeling I get when she is around. A sort of confusion, but, at the same time, a familiarity making me comfortable, fills me. It's as if I will burst open like a donut filled with too much cream. But, when her visits are coming close to an end, I feel anxious and nervous as if someone were sucking out the cream that has built me up for so long. I know when she is getting ready to disappear again. The fog starts pressing in on me again, and I can't keep my eyes open for normal lengths of time. It's as if thin gauze is slowly being wrapped around my eyes. Layer by layer, she fades. I scream and cry as she is leaving, for the loneliness that consumes my every nerve is agony, and I feel this as I feel her parting from me. I reach for her and I begin floating again.

Like I said before, it's been a long time since my friend has come to see me. She always appears to me as if she was composed from air. There is no door in which she enters through, but I can usually feel it when she is going to come to me. For a while now, I can't keep track of time, I have sensed her. Within the core of my body, I can feel her trying to come to me, burning me from within. Soon she will be here.

As I watch the corner of the room, I can see her face appearing before me. First, her black eyes, blazing like cold fire, start to gleam with their own life as her pale face and red hair become visible. Seeming out of place, a frown is forming her mouth, and tears are in her eyes. I don't understand why she looks so sad, but the feeling of happiness that is usually accompanied with her visits is not with me today. Something of great importance brings her here today. I wonder what it could be. Slowly, I realize that the horrible room, which usually disappears when she is with me, is still here, and only her head has come to me today; I see it in the window of my door. Disembodied, her head hovers in the air, face white like the moon on cold, cloudless nights. What is she trying to say?

No. I don't want to hear that. Married once, me? That is impossible. I've never even been outside the fog, let alone married. Yet, she insists it is true. Why does she keep insisting? This isn't true either. It is not possible that I am her. For one thing, she is too beautiful. Also, how can my best friend be myself? Why would I wait for visits from myself? She says that my husband betrayed me. How did he betray me? Okay. I'll pretend that I was married once, and that I await visits from myself. If this is true, then I would be crazy, but I don't feel crazy. Oh, she is hurting my head with all of this nonsense. No, that was only a dream. It was a

dream, and I don't want to remember its grisly details. It's too horrible. Why is she forcing me to remember? No, I don't want to see the blood. Don't make me look at their blood again. Cold and hard, I can feel the knife still in my hands. Oh, the dripping noise is making me crazy. Their naked bodies seem entwined together, now for eternity. No! I don't want to see this. I don't want to see him with her again. Blood is saturating the mattress, dripping on the hardwood floor—plink, plink, plink. I need to drop the knife and run. No, this is not true. I did not do this. He loved me, not the woman he was lying with. But I never married, so this couldn't have happened. Why does she insist on making me see this? She is supposed to help me be in my reality; she is supposed to be my friend. Oh, why won't my hand release the knife? No, don't do that. It hurts. I can't stop cutting my wrists. Why do I keep cutting myself? I feel my life ebbing, the knife stinging. The iron smell of blood makes me swoon as if I were intoxicated. This did not happen. This is not real. Why is my friend betraying me? I wish she would leave. I wish she would stop telling me these lies. I don't want to see them fleshed together, bleeding together, making love forever now. It was only a dream—not real, not real. It can't be real.

Here comes the gauze again around my eyes—the fog. My friend is fading, and the fog gets thicker. Wait. Why am I on the bed? The snakes are holding me down. I can't move, can't get away from here. The bodiless hands with the echoing voices are biting with their needles again. Dizziness makes me swoon as the venom courses through my veins. Make them stop. I've had enough today. When will it end?

This is better. Not even the fog can penetrate this blackness. Everything is dark, and I feel myself drifting. Calmness enters my mind. No more worries and no more pains trouble me. The darkness is fading now.

Disappointment is all I feel now that I realize I am back in the cloud-room again. I hate this room. I go to put my hands over my eyes in an attempt to rub away the image of this fantasy when I notice something odd. There are scars on my wrists. Funny little lines cross over my veins horizontally. How did these scars get here?

Winking at me again, the window sits proudly in its door. I don't want that eye staring at me. It makes me nervous. I curl up safely in my usual corner and await my friend. How long has it been since she has visited me? It seems so long now. Have I told you about my friend? She is so wonderful. I always feel comforted when she visits me. She is the only reality I have anymore.

Arrifana

As the sun descends into the horizon
Streaking the cloudless sky shell-pink,
Salt from the ocean impregnates the air with heaviness
And Portuguese tributes professed while sipping port
Float on zephyrs abating another ennobled day.

Sardines are loaded onto the grill outside
Dusted with sea-salt and smoked paprika,
While Vo'Vo boils mussels harvested at low-tide
Off of the rock underbellies on Praia de Arrifana.

The summered children cloaked in brash bravado
Drowning in giggle-juice playing hide-and-seek,
Dart through phantom mazes under blazing starlight
While eucalyptus steeps in the salted breeze.



Abalone

Reneé Suzanne Muir

Truth by Light

The plummet.
Shall I take it?
My arms stretch forth to caress the sky,
and I tilt back my head, arching like a diver.

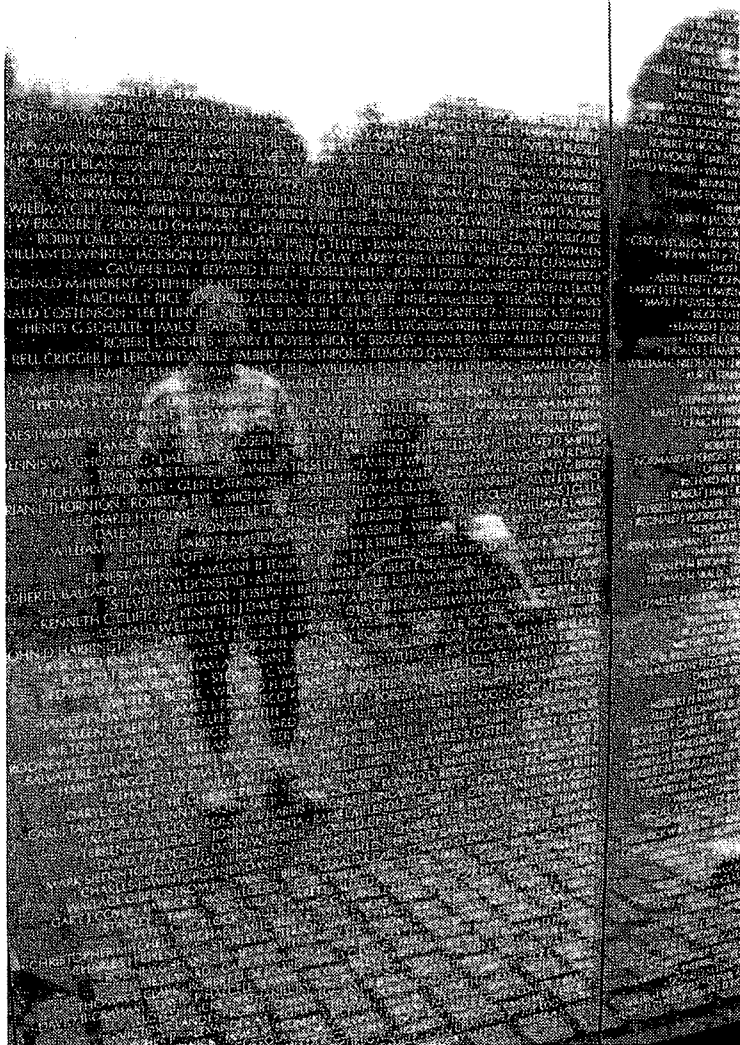
The wind tugs,
a rich scent of brine flowing deeper as I breathe,
and my body sways, hanging seemingly on the balance of my own thread,
the porous rock-face clawing at my bare feet.

I tilt my head back, my face to the murky sky,
feeling the blackness that is clenching tighter around my true sight,
oppressing my thoughts, oppressing my words, my actions.
I am chained as a slave to the system.

I struggle for purchase upon the rocks, curling my toes,
and my hands grasp at my face, tearing at my eyes.
Open them, open them, open them.
I pant with the effort of separation.

By parting my eyelids I can see the truth;
the sky is bright, cloudless, brilliant blues streaking on high.
The plummet disappears, and instead the world spreads forth, a straight line,
limitless to the horizon.

Truth revealed, I take a step, and then another,
ignoring my watering eyes,
the soft touch of grass beneath my toes,
and make my way into the world of the light.



Legacy

A common gravestone.
No epitaphs are needed.
These are our children.

Photo: *Renée Suzanne Muir*

Haiku: *Timothy John Muir*

The Time and the Place Unknown

Push Push Push

Elevator button blinks and flashes red

As a stop sign

As blood freshly spewed from a hot burning

Tire which was impaled onto the side of the road

Concrete

Turned up leaves

Rotting corpses

Sweltering in the heat of that trapped metal

Box on the side of the grave yard

Where people lay flowers in plastic encasing

Purchased on sale for \$4.99 at that

Grocery store where that man

Who cheats on his wife works

The smirk on his face flashes like that

Elevator button

And it's finally here and it's time for me to go

Back down 8 (eight) stories to see that

Lit up face that I must

Crush

Completely.

Bright eyes bewildered at the fact that on that one

Humid moon night I lay a hand on her shoulder and screamed

In my head

YOU BITCH.

But quietly responded with a "Yes, of course you can."

I threw her to the wall where her

Skull shattered

And her

Brains flew

But only in my head

Only in my head do all these things exist

Somewhere between

Reality

And

Distortion

Humbleness

And
Proportion
I lay thee down to sleep with the sun in my eye
Waiting
For my own car wreck to save me from this
Hell.

A Blood Orange

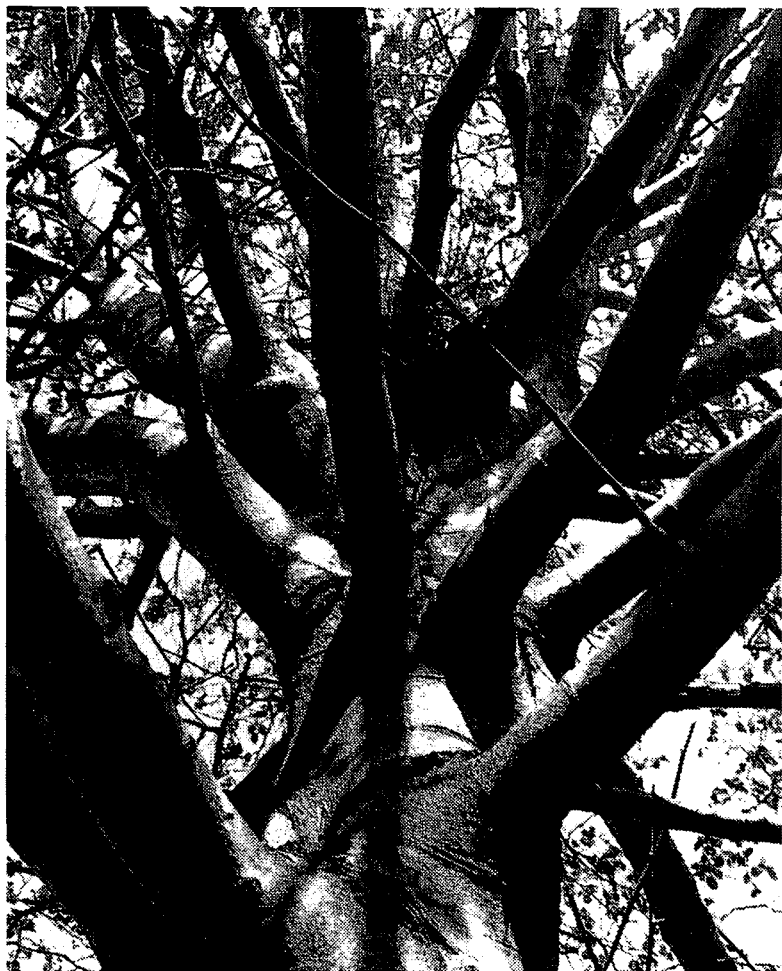
Go ahead: try it, you insist,
The redness already staining
Velvet white inner skin,
The just-seconds-before
Undisturbed fruit
Now seeping from itself.

It's very good; a little tart,
You say, as your muscled man-hands
Peel fullness from clinging crescent
Moons, caught in the blindness
Of sudden eclipse.

Indiscriminately laid on a sheet
Of paper-thin towel, pink wetness
Slowly laces intricate, shadowy matte:
Struggle for some undying
Beauty, despite the impending
Moment of devouring.

And then,
Before I can say *no thanks*,
Or *maybe later*,
Or *I'm not sure*,

The fruit is gone.



Untitled

Miranda Larsen

Grandmaster

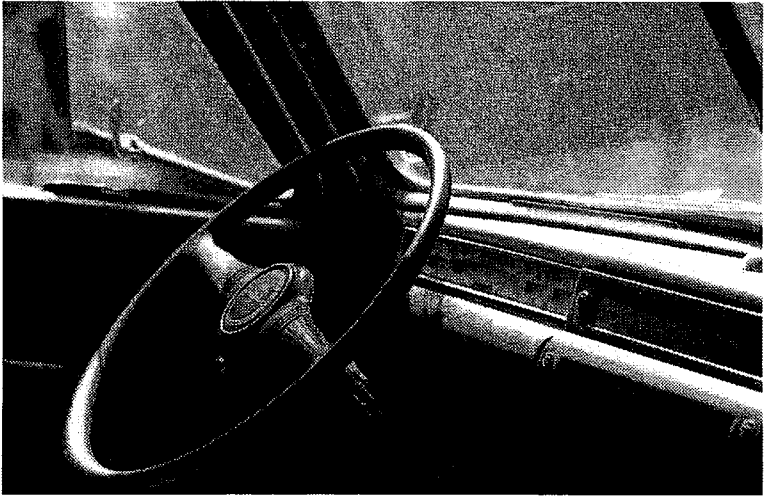
He plays blindfolded
Against a multitude of opponents,
Moving from board to board
With the fluid grace of a dancer.
Women flirt with him,
Even offer themselves on occasion.
Sometimes he makes a schoolchild's mistakes,
Losing his queen or rook
But just when the woman
Thinks she's made a conquest,
He smiles behind his blindfold
And quietly moves a pawn,
Setting her on the downhill slope to checkmate.
Rich men hint,
Not always subtly,
That in exchange for a few breaks
They could make his life
A warm bath of luxury.
Sometimes he seems tempted
But just when he appears cornered,
Like a rat he leaps free,
Launching some bold maneuver
That forces his opponent to retreat,
Clutching his wounded neck.
Intellectuals often boast
They can out think him,
Make his legend history
But it's the same old story.
He enjoys their slow humiliation.
And then there are those
Who savor each move
Like the fragrance of freshly mown grass.

Bone Scan

The technician's movements are hurried. He hovers at the console, asks me to lie still, then touches a key to focus the slow emergence of my skeleton from the magenta field of the computer screen. Bone by blue bone I'm revealed, as the great arm of the scanner slides above my body. Skull first, then the spine's source at neck, shoulders, ribs, pelvis, down to the insteps and toes, which are prongs of pale wire spread into primeval mist.

He touches another key, and, like a cell dividing, my skeleton shrinks and doubles, but before I subdivide again, and take root in the womb of blue bones, he taps another key and I vanish from the screen.

A tear rolls out of my eye, and cold, pauses on my cheekbone. I do not raise my hand to wipe it away. I lie still as he types at the keyboard. He is witnessing Creation, a scribe void of Genesis. He enters this message: I consign these bones to your silence, Lord. Their Kaiser number is 3214639. They are 48 years old, sufficient time to have lost their innocence, or discovered it; but these are matters which you know best. It is for you to read them for traces of cancer, wonder, grief, song.
December 13, 1993. Your servant.



Road Weary

Reneé Suzanne Muir

Angela Alsaleem has been writing since she was a kid. She is currently a junior struggling on the path toward an English degree with a creative writing minor. She is married, the mother of a three-year-old, and is going to school full time. She wants to teach creative writing at the university level once she finishes graduate school. Her dream is to make enough money writing that she won't have to have another job.

Diana Bishop is a writer, filmmaker, and full-time mother. She spends most of her free time reading and writing when she is not making meals or playing with Polly Pockets. She attends writing classes at Chico State and is grateful to find encouragement and support.

Alex Camarota is a senior English major at Chico State. He is currently an instructor in the university's English 1A program, which has led him to decide that what he really wants to do in life is to be a teacher; writing will have to be a hobby. He is also severely hard-of-hearing, which he must say has been an enlightening 22-year journey. He likes to use writing as a creative outlet for his difference.

Vanessa Ceccarelli was born and raised in San Jose, California. This 18-year-old has been infatuated with writing since as early as she can remember. She majors in English and minors in theatre at CSU, Chico and plans to be a high school teacher after she graduates.

Mark H. Clarke was a nurse and a poet in the previous century. Agoraphobia and an allergy to latex have driven him underground where he now works as editor for Myrmex Press. These poems were reconstructed by his housekeeper from scraps she found in his shredder.

Ralph Dranow resides in Oakland, California.

Stefanie Freele writes nonfiction and poetry but prefers to focus on fiction. She is a recent graduate of the Writer's Digest Online Workshop: Focus on the Short Story, and Zeotrope: All-Story Advanced Fiction Writing through Gotham Writers' Workshop. Her recent writing credits include "Can I Trust the Rope" in *Tree Care Industry Magazine*, "I Love My Messy Room" in *The Freelancer*, and upcoming publications in the *South Dakota Review* and the *Stolen Island Review*.

Suzan Jantz is pursuing an English major with a creative writing minor at CSU, Chico. She was born in the coastal town of Lompoc, California; moved to the mountains of Igo, California; and loves to wander the deserts of the Great Basin. Her poems have appeared in *Watershed* and—when she was six-years-old—on the walls of Miss Vogeli's second-grade classroom. Thank you to the *Watershed* staff and to Miss Vogeli.

Bryan Tso Jones is a second year M.F.A. student who resides in Chico.

Catalin Kaser teaches English at Chico Junior High School. She rides her bike to work. She is never as good at anything as she wishes she were. Catalin never complains about the valley's summer heat. Her life would be unreasonable brown rice if not for her husband, Justin Spence, who has added salt, chili, or cinnamon over and over again. She is grateful to Connie Warloe (American River College) and Sandra McPherson (UC Davis) for being such supportive writing teachers.

Miranda Larsen has loved taking photographs for as long as she can remember. It is only fitting that she wants to make photography her life's profession. Anything and everything becomes her subject.

Daniel Marlin is a painter and anti-nuclear vigiler as well as a writer. He works in Berkeley raising money over the telephone for Peace, social justice, and environmental organizations.

Ellen L. McFall's long time dream has always been to be a writer. From the time her father explained to her that the book he was reading was written by an actual person and not simply conjured from her father's mind at will. It has led her to dream up her own stories and express her own feelings in the form of the written word. While she knows that she still has quite a way to go on her own quest to be an author, it is Ellen's hope that anything she may submit might be a learning experience, at the very least.

Kyndra Elizabeth Meusel has grown up in the Santa Cruz Mountains for all eighteen years of her life, always loving to write poetry and become hidden in the richness of literature. This is her first year in Chico, and she loves every moment. She is working toward her degree in English and is planning to study abroad in England her third year. Chico State is where she is learning to spread her wings and soar into who she is becoming. Her writing is an outlet to her imagination, emotions, and fears. It is through her words that she is able to picture her life and gain a stronger grasp on who she is and on life itself.

Reneé Suzanne Muir is a local photographer whose work has appeared in several recent issues of *Watershed*.

Timothy John Muir is a writer of both fiction and nonfiction. His work has appeared in the *Seattle Weekly*, the *NW Runner* magazine, *Real Change*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and three previous issues of *Watershed*.

Romaine Riley lives in Chico and attended Washington University in Saint Louis, MO. His work has been published in the *California Quarterly*, *Connexions*, *The Examiner*, and *Memo*.

Shannon Rooney wonders, like singer/songwriter Bruce Cockburn, "What does it take for the heart to explode into stars?" She graduated from CSU, Chico last semester with an M.A. in interdisciplinary studies (English/education). For her master's project she wrote a children's novel.

Dustin J. Schwindt is working toward his master's in English literature. He aspires someday to combine his love of photography, writing, and film into a creative career.

Audrey C. Small sometimes uses string figures (cat's cradles) to accompany poems and stories. Her late mother, Paula Collinson, originally taught her string figures and encouraged her to find written sources to expand her interest in this ancient art form. Audrey has taught and shared this interest in the San Francisco Bay area and Butte County, as well as in travels with her husband, Phil. Her poems have appeared in literary magazines in England and the United States, as have her articles on string figures and how they relate to the language and humanities.

Heidi Wallis is currently working toward a master's degree in English with an emphasis in creative writing. She will graduate from Chico State in May 2005.

Marianne Werner teaches in the English department at Butte Community College. She received her M.A. in creative writing from Syracuse a lifetime ago. She loves to travel and enjoys photography.

Jennifer White is a mother, wife, and aspiring writer. She is a short breath away from achieving her B.A. in English and hopes to use this degree when her family moves to Portugal.

