



WATERSHED

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Spring 2005 CSU, Chico

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Volume 28, Number 2
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Editors

Michelle Barber
Stacie Jenkins
Emily Pickard

Faculty Advisor

Casey Huff

Cover Design

Toni Young

Publication Design

Samantha Cebers

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What I Don't and Do Remember

We must have made love,
But I don't remember. I do remember
Your intended foreplay:
Awkward arms,
Groping my house-wife waist.
The smell of dishwater
Followed us to the bedroom.

Did I fall asleep?

That year, I remember craving
Corn dogs on a stick, Beach Boys
On cassette, Sake with my best girlfriend.
And, one night
After Szechwan at Choo's,
I don't remember the coming
Home, or the possible foreplay,
But—oh—the kiss!

The kiss—
I do remember. Lingering tingle
Of spices on my tongue—
Cinnamon, clove, nutmeg: hot.
Fagara, sansho, Sichuan: hot.
Citron round around—
Portal of surprise
When your lips,
Suddenly kissing mine,
Were unmistakably hers.
And, I remember,
Most vividly,
Kissing *those* lips in return.

Largest Earth-Filled Dam in the World, Really Just a Big Levy

The five of us stroll on the top of the dam at Lake Oroville
we gaze at the curvature of the lake
and I point out how it used to be a canyon
before the engineers forced the water back
and filled the crevices.

We go down to the small beach and catch the shadows of trout
before climbing the hill
to return to my home overlooking the valley,
when the youngest becomes too tired to walk,
I carry him, even though his mother warns he is too old.

When they leave I crouch
and the children tightly embrace me
the oldest rests her cheek for a moment on the curve
between my shoulder and neck
she whispers, "See you soon, Grandpa."

Their bodies feel slender and vulnerable
like they would snap if yanked in the wrong direction
and I imagine to them that I seem huge and adaptable
but the opposite is the case and when
they realize that truth I will be gone.

Their mothers hug me casually
both of them have come into the phase known by all women
wherein they are unmistakably adult
yet their youth makes them alluring
and they project an air that each moment is vital.

After they leave, I run my fingers
along the backs of my books
pick out Emily Dickinson's complete works
and walk out to the balcony
for a glass of wine and a cigar.

My house is in order.

My memories from two decades ago
feel like deleted scenes from a director's cut
of a movie that was already too long,
and the women with whom I lived and traveled

(while neglecting them
as I dredged
the formless craters of my conscience
for some sense)
rarely call anymore
and when they do
we simply exchange facts
as if filling out an inventory.

When necessary, I can just as readily
find a Ray Charles recording
or an article upon chaos theory,
my life has become a series of small gifts
that propel me forward
into some forgotten
world
like the hesitating pitches
heard
upon opening an expensive
box of jewelry.

The Holy I

I filled out a survey here
At St. Anthony's.
They asked how many portions
I usually ate at lunch.
I said, three.
One for the Father,
One for the Son,
And one for the Holy I.
Things are looking up.
I couldn't find work for months.
Yesterday I saw a Help Wanted sign
In a bar
So I went in
And gave them my resume.
The guy handed me a mop,
Told me to get to work.
Tonight I'm making ice
And cleaning windows.
I think my luck is changing.
It's a full moon.

Sunrise

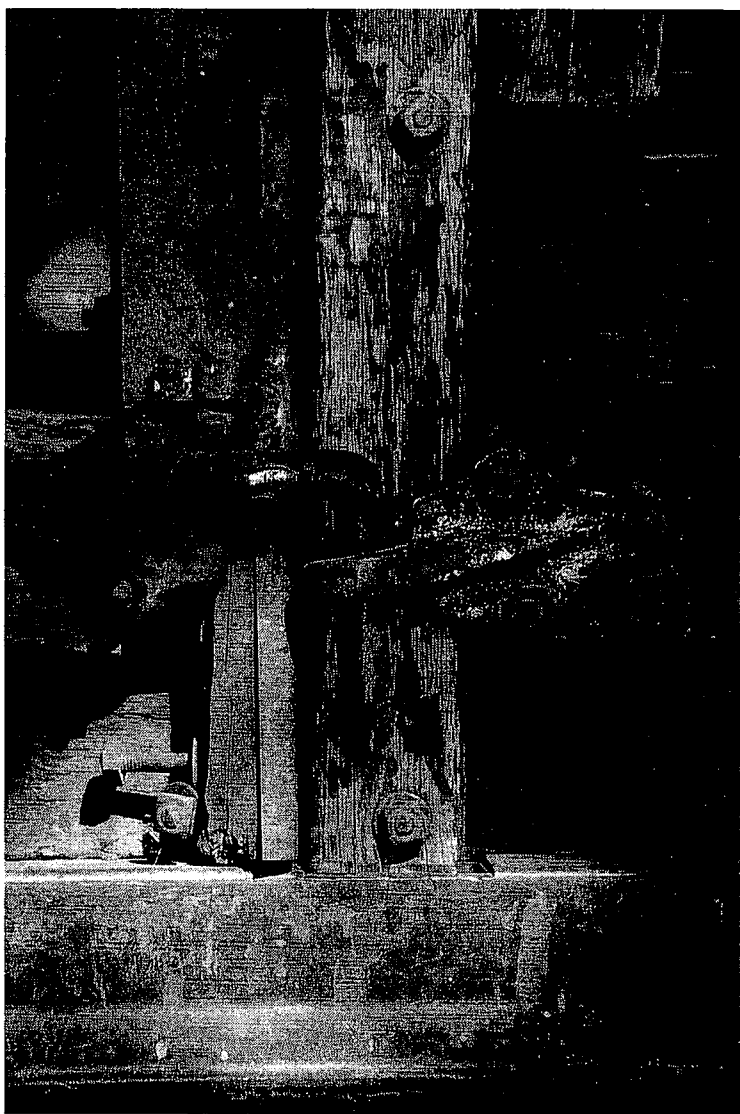
Because she's still asleep across the room
On the darker side of my little earth
Where curtained night conceals the spreading blight
Of our street, our city, and our whole race,

I cannot say my day dawns
Outside, there in a strange distant place
That does not know the shivering
Of her eyelids as she awakens,
Fluttering like wings of small trapped birds.

Until she does awake, and smile—or not,
I shall know no lifting of the darkness,
Of any kind, from heart or blood or mind:
Yes, even my eyes will deny the light.

The sun did not set gently,
But in sputtering rage plunged last night
Into terrible emptiness,
Leaving long shadows of spite and lies,
And ugly bruises on lovely face.

The streaks of blood that edge her kissful mouth
Etch a sadness that rests uneasy there.
Her touch is all that brakes my hellward fall.
Oh, what if she is not asleep—but dead?



Ironwood

RENÉE SUZANNE MUIR

And Whose Little Baby Are You?

The Gossip Teas of Maggie McCarty were legend in the seaport town of Ayr, Scotland. Some said it was because she used brandy instead of cream. But most agreed it was the scandals that were revealed after several spots had been poured. One scandal in particular had provided Maggie with conversational crumpets for more than a year. But don't let it be said that Maggie rented a room to Heather Darnley for that reason alone. After all, there were other tenants, though none so spirited. To be sure!

Now, on a fresh Saturday in late April, with new leaves chattering amongst themselves in a breeze off the Firth of Clyde, Maggie waited eagerly for Heather to come down the hall. She could hear the final quick preparations as she had overheard many sounds from Heather's booth since her arrival, two years ago. Had it indeed been that long? Ahh, yes. Two years before, slight a day or two, Heather's husband, Wee-Jack, had departed to battle the good fight of World War II. With blind faith, he'd assumed Heather would deliver herself into the reliable hands of a recommended chaperone: Maggie McCarty. He'd never dreamed how many other hands would be offered in assistance.

Maggie gently rocked in her overstuffed chair. Duncan, her overfed husband, sat across the room reading his paper, legs like cathedral columns planted in front of him. No floor would ever doubt its position in life as Duncan walked above. Maggie tittered at her oh-so-steady Duncan, sipped some tea, and again mused: that sprightly lass Heather, after only six months, had bobbed up three months pregnant—arithmetic that was counted on the fingers of every woman in the community, sure as Sunday's bells. And here it was, a year-and-a-half later, a baby boy rocking a crib, and Wee-Jack due to arrive in exactly...Maggie glanced at her pendant watch... thirty minutes. "Ahh, the poor Wee-Jack," she thought, "completely unknowing of the bunting reception about to be bestowed upon 'im." She fidgeted in excitement. Tomorrow would be a grand Gossip Tea.

Absently Maggie brushed her hairnet off her forehead and broke into smile crinkles barely fifty-three years long...but mischief wide. Heather wasn't *bad*. A tad impetuous perhaps, but not really *bad*...that is as mopsies go. Nothing a smart wiggling wouldn't have cured long ago! Had been of little matter to Heather that Wee-Jack was off to war. Wasn't the sort of man to be missed. Or was it perhaps that Heather wasn't the sort of woman who had time for missing? In either case, Maggie had taken great relish in these last two years. And

since she would never in the world do something scandalous herself, she delighted in the missteps of others. She glanced over at Duncan, reading his *Glasgow Sentinel* through Ben Franklin glasses, giving those docile eyebrows of his an ugly time of it with frowns and rubs, fretting as he was over some unsporting soccer result, while a comic mole near the corner of his mouth jogged in time to silent curses. Suddenly the thought of scandal involving either of them seemed outlandish. Too bad in a way. As she chuckled at this bit of fling there was a rap at the door.

"Come in, Dovey," Maggie called. Heather entered, her baby securely scissored in the crook of one arm, and quickly crossed the room to the readied playpen near the couch. Duncan glanced over his glasses and issued his usual "Um-hmm, um-hmm," to acknowledge Heather's entry—the second "um-hmm" with increased volume in case the first was missed. These mumbled greetings were usually reserved for entries and exits. Duncan had learned that other comment, no matter how innocent, might be construed as an opinion, and just might be the proper drop to overflow God-knows-what pail of twaddle from Maggie's bountiful flights of fancy. As Heather leaned over the playpen, Duncan adlibbed a peek. This was one habit Maggie not only allowed but encouraged. "Plenty of look prevents a touch" had been her saw all their married life.

"Only be gone about an 'our," Heather said, hurriedly popping the child into the playpen and scurrying to a nearby mirror.

"You know I don't mind, Dovey. Small enough a cross it is, compared to yours."

Heather looked at herself this way and that, fluffing her spit curls, smoothing her silk blouse and skirt taut over her figure. She touched the curls again remembering Wee-Jack's expression for them: pulley hooks! No matter. Not to worry. There'd ruddy well been those who saw them as fragile wisps.

"Well, then," Maggie beamed, "time for our fateful comeuppance, is it now?"

"Maggie McCarty!" Heather teased, looping her purse onto her arm, "There you go getting all aquiver. Mustn't you know. You're such a lady to your fanciers," she said with a twinkle, "don't want to spoil it all by being a common gossip, do you?" The baby batted at an overhanging bird in the playpen and giggled. Maggie shot him a suspicious glance, then turned again to Heather crossing to the door.

"There now, old dear," Heather said through a relieved breath, "I'm off. Running a trifle late, I'm afraid."

"Going to tell 'im right out, are you?" Maggie smiled.

"Of course." Heather turned at the door. "You know that. Truth is always better. Sooner or later, no matter—if the timing be right."

"There's the best thing to do." Maggie's tone was one of rubbing her hands together in anticipation.

"Must fly," and Heather skittered out the door.

"Um-hmm," said Duncan, then realized she was gone and he'd missed a glance.

Maggie crossed to the playpen and cooed the baby's two chins. "And whose little baby are you?" she coaxed. "Who's your favorite of all?" The little boy poked three chubby fingers at her and gurgled. Maggie smiled, then turned quickly away knowing that the game she had invented as a saucy little jest would soon come to an end. She returned to her rocker piqued by the nearing loss of her most prized scandal.

"Um-hmm," said Duncan from behind his *Glasgow Sentinel*.

Twenty minutes later, Wee-Jack Darnley stood at Maggie's door glancing about the room in anticipation. "So where she'd be?" he boomed excitedly, waiting for her to pop out coquettishly from behind a door or drape.

"Why she went to meet you," Maggie explained. "You missed 'er, did you?"

"Bluidy train arrived early," he said, the magic disappeared, "so I thought I'd catch 'er before she left. All right wi' you if I wait 'ere 'til she gets back? I'm shut out, sure enough."

"Why, not at all," said Maggie, warming to the certain drama of the situation, "The pleasure's all mine, I'm sure." Wee-Jack dropped his duffle on his foot, recovered, and partially stretched. He'd always been afraid to completely unwind his hulk in a room such as this, brimming with breakable dainties as it was. Maggie offered him a chair while introducing Duncan.

"How do you do, sir?" smiled Wee-Jack, hands tight in his pockets.

"Um-hmm," said Duncan, folding his paper in thirds and leaving the room.

Maggie sat down and nervously tittered, at a loss as how to relate to Wee-Jack's big dumbness. Sweet and all that, but... Absently she began to hum—then, "Lovely... lovely, isn't it?" she said, staring off.

"Yes, it's that rightly enough, Mis' McCarty. Lovely tune," he said, easing into his chair testily.

"I...I meant out of doors."

"Oh. Oh, yes, that too." Wee-Jack folded and unfolded his arms, then noticed the baby. In two strides he was at the playpen's side, lifting the boy high in the air. "And whose little tyke might this be? Tough fry, if I ever!"

"Why...why," Maggie stumbled.

"E's a sprightly thing, 'e is," continued Wee-Jack.

"Ah, well," said Maggie with finality, sitting back, rocking, "since your wife was going to tell you anyway, I might as well be the one with the glad tidings." She took a quick spot of tea, cleared her throat.

"Fine-looking lad," continued Wee-Jack, "fine lad."

"Might as well...might I?" she chanced.

"Might what?" asked Wee-Jack, bringing the baby to him.

"Might as well tell the truth of the matter?"

"Ha-ha!" growled Wee-Jack, circling one hand around the baby's ribs, tickling him. The boy, instead of laughing, regarded this giant with abject, wide-eyed fear.

"It's your wife's baby, it is."

"Not likely," Wee-Jack said absently, "seeing 'ow I've been gone over two years, and Heather's been with you the whole... 'e's *what*?"

"But, it is, Mr. Darnley, now why'd I go and make up a choice little tidbit like that, if it weren't..."

Wee-Jack dropped the baby back into the playpen as if he'd just discovered a wetness, studied him, then turned to Maggie and asked quickly, "And 'ow old would 'e be?"

"A little fat of a year."

"Is...is 'e?"

"God's very own truth," Maggie smiled in expectancy. "Isn't 'e a dickens?"

Wee-Jack looked back at the child. "Dickens isn't the word comes first to mind, I'll tell you that, sure enough!" He strode to the door and yanked up his duffle.

"Oh, come now, Mr. Darnley, come, come. Sit down and 'ave a drop of special tea. Relax now. Why, these things 'appen all the time during wartime, Mr. Darnley, and natural..."

"Them 'appening don't excuse them, Mis' McCarty."

"...and natural a thing it is, too."

"Natural to you, I'm coming to conclude, Mis' McCarty, but right gamey to me, for a fact."

"Why, Mr. Darnley! Would you be suggesting I 'ad a 'and in what 'appened?"

"I'd be suggesting you 'adn't a 'and in *anything* Heather did or didn't do, Mis' McCarty. Right sparse in the line of being responsible, I'd say right off."

"Would you be accusing me of neglect?" Maggie asked, huffing a few inches out of her chair.

"And that I would indeed, Mis' McCarty."

"Neglectful? Remiss?" She approached him now, teetering, but shoulders smart, head drawn back, three fluted chins spilling onto her collar.

"Shoddy," Wee-Jack corrected, "not so purposefully neglectful at that. Things 'ave a way of going off-kilter, I'm first to allow."

"Shoddy!" Maggie blurted, glaring up at him within inches of his tie tack.

"Now, Mis' McCarty, there's no call for *you* to get nasty. Weren't *your* spouse went out and brought home the messiness." Wee-Jack dropped his duffle, pressed indelicately as he was against the front doorknob. Before he could continue he was jolted against Maggie as Heather burst into the room, fell, and scattered small purse privates across the floor. Losing her footing, Maggie clung around Wee-Jack's waist for balance, while he, girdled now with twice his weight, performed an embarrassed jig to maintain his. The baby chortled, waving his arms wildly at being entertained so. Duncan popped his head in, then out, like a shy cuckoo.

"Ello! What 'ave we 'ere?" Heather asked from her landing spot on the floor. "What an 'andsome couple; though, I'm blessed if I've run upon that little step before. 'Atch it on the spot, did you?"

Wee-Jack disengaged the still-clinging Maggie, as one squirming off a wet bathing suit, and pointed at the baby, never taking his eyes from Heather. "You're one to talk of 'atching, you are, what with your weanie 'ere."

Heather flinched, glared at Maggie.

"Heather, I..." Maggie began.

"And *I*," Wee-Jack continued knowledgeably, "know there's more

to the blighter's getting 'ere than just 'atching 'im some pink and blue morning in a June's nest. So, don't bother trying to convince me contrariwise."

Color rose to Heather's ears.

"Heather, I..." Maggie began again.

"Way I see it played," Wee-Jack went on, "and knowing you way I do—I see you slipping into a local shebeen for a cheerer or two, ending up on a randy with some big stot for the duration."

Heather slowly and deliberately got to her feet, never taking her eyes from the retreating Maggie.

"Heather, please..." Maggie again tried.

Wee-Jack gave the slightest indication of rocking on his feet. "Now deny that isn't the way it was," he confidently dared.

"It was," Heather said simply.

"Was?" he asked in disbelief, fully prepared for Heather's heated and vehement denial.

"It was?" echoed Maggie, still backing away.

"So?" Heather folded her arms and waited. "It 'appened, and that's that, sure enough."

Wee-Jack, off-balance once again, picked up his duffle, slowly went to the door, and opened it on his ankle. Maggie bit her tongue. Wee-Jack turned around, jaw tightened, and pointed at Heather. "I've well 'ad enough, you 'ear?"

"Yes."

"No woman's ever done that to Wee-Jack Darnley and got away with it, least no *wife*, anyway."

"That's right."

"Is there no shame in you? None at all?"

"I don't think so, no."

Wee-Jack dropped his arm, shuffled, started out, turned again, frantic as a deflating balloon. "It 'appening don't make it right, Heather Darnley! Didn't 'appen to Mum during the last war. No reason should of 'appened to you in this one."

"That's right," Heather said quietly.

Started again, turned. "Let that be a lesson next time you think about tipping the ruddy cup, Heather Darnley."

"Yes," she said.

"What kind of woman be you," Wee-Jack burst, "what with all your 'yeses,' noddings, 'that's rights,' sweet smiles, and innocence when

you've 'ad a slattern's time of it since I've gone?"

"Put a gun in the 'ands of a man don't make 'im a soldier right off, like you know, Wee-Jack..."

"Aie! What kind of logic's that? Listening to you's like being in the rain without a roof, knowing where it's coming from, why it's coming, but getting wet all the same. I'll...I'll be at Mum's," he said quietly—then slammed the door behind him.

Heather slowly turned toward Maggie who backed into her chair. "Maggie! You snooping, tattling..."

"Oh, Dovey," Maggie interrupted, "I *am* sorry."

Heather stifled a shout as Duncan, cued by the slamming door, re-entered the room um-hmming, shaking his head, and took quick advantage of the pause to don his jacket and escape the argy-bargy more than likely to be forthcoming. "Um-hmm," and the door closed again.

"Maggie, you are the most..."

"I knew you wouldn't mind," Maggie interjected rapidly, "since you was going to tell 'im anyway, I thought I'd soften the shock a bit."

"Soften, my bum!" Heather blurted. "I wasn't going to tell 'im right out. The timing weren't right, the day 'e arrives." She glanced at the playpen. "Well, now. Ain't that just fine! And the Johnny came marching 'ome to a Johnny that wasn't a Junior, pretty as you please. What a botch of it you've gone and done."

"But you said you was going to tell 'im right out."

"It's my business if I change my mind, Maggie McCarty! And weren't any of your business, that's what." Heather strutted to the door. "Furthermore, you can just keep the baby, you can. Call it interest on two year's rent, or...or wages for all your snoopin'."

"But..." Maggie put her tea down. "What do you want to go and do that for? It's yours after all."

"Just 'alf, at that."

"But, that's more than it is *me*," Maggie protested.

"Not at all, Maggie-Dovey," Heather snapped, opening the door. "It's your old man's! And, 'e's yours!"

Maggie watched the door close, her mouth opening in disbelief. Slowly she looked over at the couch where the baby was smiling, pointing three chubby fingers at her. And Duncan? How could he? When? To *her*? Dreadful! "And 'ere I've been so good to 'im all this time." Her lower lip trembled. She looked over at the empty chair

and neatly folded *Sentinel*. “Um-hmm,” she pouted, “prevents a touch, my bum!” But then the trembling stopped, the pout disappeared, and slowly, ever so gradually, a smile began to stutter at the corners of her mouth. Tomorrow’s Tea! Ahh, yes. It would indeed be the highlight of all Teas. Oh, most assuredly it would be.

She could see it now: her friends gathered around, leaning forward, breathless, her clock ticking suspense, and...she would tidy her special lace collar from Spain about her neck. Then, when they could stand it no longer, she’d begin, “My dears...you will never believe...”

“What? *What?*” they’d ask.

“Well!” she’d hesitate. “That little strumpet, Heather?”

“Yes.”

“Down the ‘all?”

“Yes.”

“That I took in out of kindness? And gave comfort?”

“Yes, yes...”

“And...Oh, my dears, it ‘urts so to speak of it.”

“Go on! Do go on, Maggie,” they’d beg.

“...That rascal ‘usband of mine...” she’d lower her head.

“Oh, no!” Shocked gasps.

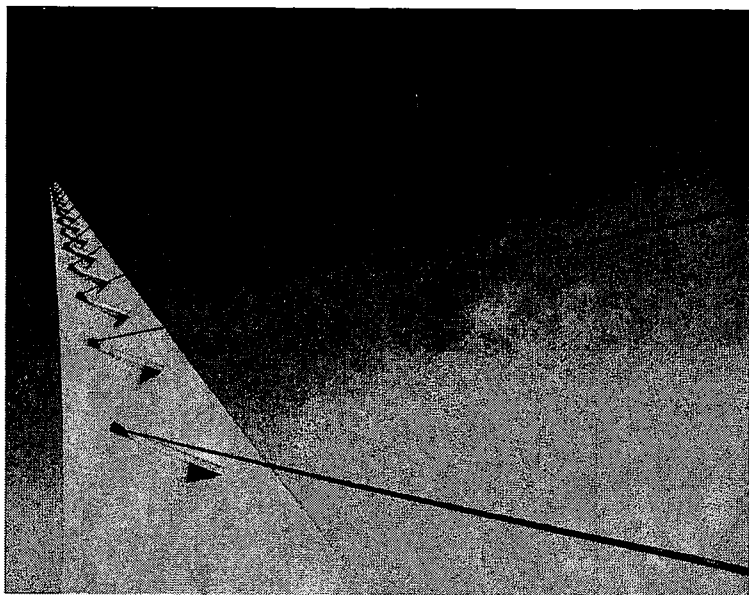
“...yes. It’s true...true. Well, it was me who insisted I keep the child.”

“Oh, Maggie, Maggie, you are truly brave.”

“I mean, a shame it is, if the tyke went with the likes of ‘er. I just couldn’t retain my peace of mind, could I?”

“Ow did you...find out?” one would whisper.

“Well...” she’d lean forward and begin.



Sundial Bridge

CELINA A. WESTPHAL

I Didn't Want To, But You Made Me Sing

The moon rocked in the sky
between two palm trees,
the blue-black hammock of air
swaying to mariachi tunes
coming from Wappo Taco

*yes, señora,
I want you, I want you*

Flamingoes dipped a neon flamenco
above the *No Vacancy* sign.
In this wine valley town the cafés
and bars and motels were full.
Only my heart was empty.

*You, too?
Who would have thought.*

Tender as the bruised begonia
wedged against the poolside fence
you pulled me close and said, *Don't cry.*
With stars I'll write you a haiku
and cradle your heart like a child's.

I was in the shadow place, beyond reach.
You wooed me out. What could I do but sing?
And the moon was full and carried my vowel
over the rim of the farthest hill.

At the Post Office

She is young and holding
a small package wrapped
in clear plastic over brown paper,
decorated with brightly colored
stickers of flowers and red hearts.
It is addressed to Juan Ramos,
somewhere in Iraq, and she lists
his military code numbers,
customs papers, and contents—
wife, sister, girlfriend.

Shock for Juan Ramos:
the hot red sky over
southern Iraq explodes.
Embedded there in desert sand,
he watches missiles irradiate white—
unfinished fireworks against
oil blackened smoke,
sand in his mouth,
finger nerve endings
gripping his rifle...
the flowered package
still in flight.
Blasted and bomb-rattled,
he hears the distant calls
to prayer five times daily.

Awe for Juan Ramos:
precision cluster bombings,
MOAB, able to strike surgically
high command bunkers
in the middle of the night,
rubble around ancient
fractured blue wall tiles.
Surgically strike a bus in Syria,
mistake, 5 dead 13 injured,
leaving a child
with shrapnel in her spine,
surgical, the IV drip
of a young boy,

dark brown long-lashed eyes,
surgically strike a market
in Baghdad, 62 dead shoppers.
Juan Ramos, poised,
camouflaged, expectant,
opening the flowered package
in his tent—butterscotch,
lock of brown hair, dice,
metal cross, pictures, hand soap,
red bandana, lucky penny—
wife, sister, girlfriend.

A wish for Juan Ramos:
that you could see
a black clouded sky, late
winter, dark billowed
blue horizon, cold.
Three white swans,
startled from behind golden,
long-speared Tule Lake grasses
lift mutely into flight,
one, two, three, balanced,
wings easing them up and into
a calm and perfect grace.

Poet's Prayer

Let me when
letters no longer leap and dance
from the alphabet onto my nerve-skin pages;
let me when
whiskey no longer warms and whispers
in wit-whetted words of willing women;
let me when
the stings and salt of a stranger's tears
can no longer lacerate my heart;
let me when
flesh sweeter than my own
no longer writhes and revels under me;
let me then—
have died before then.

Trajectory

Making paper airplanes of
our love letters and
tossing them—
folded, fluttering—
is the best apology I can
muster.

Origami culpability.

I admire the symmetry
in it.

The breeze beneath,
and the touchdown.

In my childhood,
my grandfather lost two inches hang gliding,
I watched his wife hospital-held,
hoping for anything like speech.
There was a coma, surgeries.
When he came to, shorter and thin,
you'd think he and grandma
would fold each other up in love,
resplendent in their second chance.

But that was not the sort of marriage they had.
He's gone now.
And it's she
who glides on wind's
unseen trajectory.

Thoughts at Midnight

“War is peace”

“Peace is war”

The media are on vacation.

I want to sleep.

“Bombs bring us security”

“Killing brings us safety”

Terrorist Alerts—Color-coded—feed fear to the people.

I want to sleep.

Which law

will give us the most security and lose us the most liberty?

Patriot Act I? Patriot Act II? III? IV?

Or, CAPPS II, perhaps?

I want to sleep.

“By god, this is not the time
for whining about liberty!”

“Security is good”

“This is not the time
for equal protection under the law”

“We are good; they are evil”

“Dissent is unpatriotic”

“Bush knows best”

“Secrecy is good”

“Silence is better”

“Turn in your neighbor”

I want to sleep.

“It was the CIA’s fault, you know”

Bush said so. Rumsfeld said so

Condoleezza and Ashcroft say so.

It's media manipulation. Spin. Spin. Spin

I want to sleep.

I want to sleep.

WAKE UP AMERICA. WAKE UP AMERICA.
WAKE UP AMERICA.

You've been sleeping way too long, America.

Wake up. Get up. Speak up. America.

Flip the script, America.

Peace is Peace.

War is War.

Peace is Peace.

War is War.

Bombing brings nothing but death.

Killing brings killing.

Revenge brings revenge.

Let the oil and weapons go.

Let's scrap the Patriot Act.

Love your neighbors.

Tell the truth. Tell the truth.

The Truth

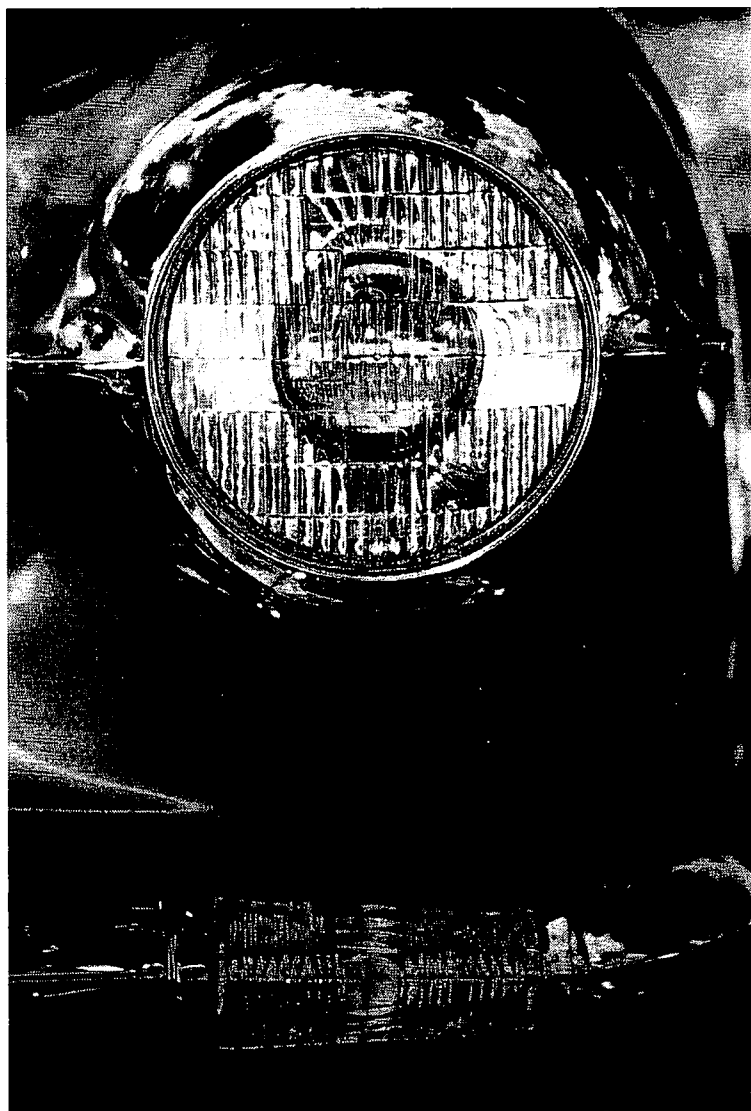
We are all children of God. We are all
children of God. We—Bush, Saddam, Osama,
Arafat, Sharon, Chirac,
you, me—

are all children of God.

We are We are children God

All

God.



Classic Look

RENÉE SUZANNE MUIR

The Old Man and Me

The great oak by the bus stop took a deep breath and with a mighty shudder blew, sending autumn leaves of gold and brown shivering to the ground. Tiny acorns slammed against the hard earth, sounding like popcorn when they landed or feeling like BB pellets when they bounced off your head. The wind had picked up and my long red hair kept slapping against my face. There was no shelter at the bus stop, so I pulled my white sweater tight against my chest and crammed my hands inside the sleeves. Within minutes the long yellow school bus skidded to a halt, gave one big yawn, and spit my three daughters out onto the highway. Two little blondes and one brunette with a touch of red, like my hair, raced towards me. Grabbing hands, we all ran against the wind towards our home and into the warm kitchen. Pink and purple jackets, Care Bear backpacks, and Strawberry Shortcake lunchboxes were left by the back door as they scrambled for hot chocolate and *The Mickey Mouse Club*. Jaclyn, my middle blonde daughter, glanced out the patio door and announced, “Papaw Homer’s here.”

Looking up from my hot chocolate mug, I smiled and remembered the days when I had dreaded his visits.

I had been married to Papaw Homer’s grandson Jack for three years and was expecting his great-grandchild, when I finally met the formidable man. He only lived sixteen miles from our home. He had left Jack’s grandmother years before I joined the family. That, Bobbie—his daughter and my mother-in-law—could handle. But when he married Rosetta, a woman of low character and younger than his own daughter, his fate was sealed. Rosetta was a tramp by their own morally high standards and was not allowed to set foot in their home. The couple was excluded from all family functions; no one dared even mention their names.

I could not understand how anyone could leave or hurt Jack’s Grandmother Deane. The affectionate gray-haired, blue-eyed woman had opened her arms to this orphan, and I had fallen into them, hungry for a family’s love. She cooked chicken and dressing for me and ordered towels and sheet sets for our wedding from Fingerhut and paid them off a little each month. Quick to hug, she had become my instant grandmother. Grandma was very religious and had no tolerance for anyone who wasn’t. In the church, she was the saint that everyone called when they needed someone to pray and “touch God.” In her presence, you felt warmth as if you were nestled under

a blanket on a soft feather bed. When we were alone, she would talk about Homer, how he'd get drunk and stay out all night and then want to crawl into bed with her. She once told me with an indignant huff, "He always came home smelling like cheap liquor and nasty women, and I'd make him go sleep on the couch."

His drinking lasted several years, and finally he quit coming home. Neighbors superiorly reported any sightings of the drunken runaway. Homer quit supporting his family, filed for divorce, and married the lovely Rosetta. I did not want to meet him.

As the birth of my first daughter approached, we heard that Rosetta had "taken everything that wasn't nailed down" and left Homer. We were also told that he was having heart problems and might not make it much longer. Cautiously, the family tiptoed around the anger and journeyed to his small farm. He stood on his screened porch, wearing blue Dickie overalls, his thinning gray hair hidden behind his green John Deere cap. His mouth formed a straight line, as did his daughter's and his grandson's. No one smiled, no one hugged; it was a test of wills. All three cut from the same cloth: strong, determined, always right. He did not invite us in. Finally, Jack said, "This is my wife, Liz."

He took one quick look, nodded his head, and flatly stated, "How do."

Bobbie, my mother-in-law, asked about his garden, and that seemed to break the ice. Slowly, he climbed down the steps and led us through a wooden gate and into his garden. We walked through rows of tomatoes, yellow squash, cucumbers, and prickly okra. Homer explained how he always planted according to the *Farmer's Almanac* and the position of the moon. He said that Floyd Jones, his fishing buddy down the road, did not believe in the *Almanac*, and that's why he could only grow worm-infested crops.

"He tries to catch catfish with rubber worms too," he added with smug disbelief.

He had hung a porch swing between two elm trees in his front yard, and we finished our visit gently swinging, listening to the rusting chains and the crickets chirping. The swing faced his open porch, and I could see green tomatoes lined up on a low shelf, soaking up the afternoon sun. We left with some of those tomatoes along with paper sacks of snap peas, green beans, and an easier feeling. But, I still did not like him.

Several times during the following months Homer visited my mother-in-law's while I was there. I rarely entered the conversations; I did not know how to talk to him. He talked about fly-fishing with Jack and my father-in-law, Bill. When the talks turned to heated political debates, I'd leave the room. At supper, the men would discuss sports and hunting while Bobbie fried Homer's fresh catfish and rolled cornmeal and onions into hushpuppies. His visits were short, and I was always glad when he left.

One day, he came when I was alone. Neither of us knew what to do. We made small talk as he admired his new great-granddaughter. He kept picking at his thumb, and I finally asked if something was wrong. He stated, "I jabbed a splinter into my finger this morning." I let him work at it for quite awhile, and then I couldn't stand it any longer.

"Let me look," I told him.

"Oh, I'll work it out," he humbly stated.

Marching across the room, I took his calloused hand in mine and felt for the splinter.

"That's in pretty deep," I diagnosed.

After a quick search, I located a needle and tweezers and again took his hand. Softly, I picked at the intruding splinter, stopping every few seconds to ask, "Does that hurt?"

He smiled shyly and said, "No, you're doing fine."

Once the operation was over, I offered him coffee, and we made small talk about my new daughter and his job with the Forest Service. His job was to climb several hundred steps to the top of a fire tower and watch for fires. It was a coveted position in his little community, and he was proud to have it. He stayed around thirty minutes that day, and it was enough.

Years later, two to be exact, after our third daughter was born, we moved one mile from Homer's house. The girls could run free in the country and attend a small, very structured elementary school. A few weeks after moving, the girls begged to visit "Papaw Homer," and I reluctantly agreed. As they happily snacked on ginger snap cookies and cool cups of milk, I noticed a game of solitaire spread out on his kitchen table.

"I never learned how to play that," I told him.

"Why, there ain't nothing to it," he answered.

"Maybe someday you can teach me," I bravely responded.

The next day his green GMC pickup pulled up in my yard. "Oh no," I thought, "What am I going to do with him?" He walked in smiling and carrying a deck of cards. I made coffee and removed the floral placemats and flowers from my kitchen table. We sat down, and he became the instructor. Hours went by unnoticed as I first watched him play, then we played together, and then he watched as I played.

"Good God Almighty," he said, startling me, "I gotta get home and feed the cows." Neither of us could believe it was that late. I was sorry to see him go.

He started calling me, quick, short calls, "Ya'll doing okay? Going to church on Sunday? This weather just ain't letting up."

Before I knew it, I was calling him. "You doing okay? Want to come for supper?"

He made each of the girls a fishing pole and proudly brought them over. We all five walked down a small grassy hill to a nearby pond where the girls clumsily cast their lines. When Candice, my oldest daughter, landed a small bass, they all three started screaming and ran from the flopping fish.

Papaw Homer just said, "Well, if that don't beat all."

The girls calmed down as we released the squirming fish, and for the first time, I heard him laugh.

Somehow we became confidants. I learned there are two sides to every story. He talked of how lonely he was with Deane.

"She didn't want anything to do with me after she had her two babies; I started drinking then and couldn't stop. I know it was wrong, but if you don't feed your sheep at home, they'll go somewhere else to eat."

I knew Grandmother Deane was prudent when it came to sex. She thought it was for making babies and nothing more.

"Loneliness eats at a man; she had her children, and she didn't need me anymore," he said, shaking his head.

I understood loneliness. While his grandson wasn't quite that bad, I was lonely, too. Jack would leave me for weeks at a time to go deer hunting, duck hunting, or any kind of hunting. When he was home, he watched football, basketball, or any kind of ball. I was a minor part in his life while he was my life. Many nights Jack was late coming home; I watched out the window thinking he had had an accident and praying that he come home soon. His response to my fear would

be, "I was running my mouth; didn't know it had gotten so late." Papaw knew what was going on, and we talked about it.

He said, "You save your money, Liz; one day you will want to leave him. You can make it on your own; I did."

I hung my head, but I knew he was right.

We talked or visited daily. I helped him shop for new furniture, a tweed blue and tan sofa with a darker tan recliner. I surprised him with a handmade crochet afghan to cover his new chair. He called one day and told me that he had fresh tomatoes. I did not have time to pick them up that day, so he brought them over the next day and remarked, "Gosh dang it, I gotta grow it, pick it, and then bring it to your house."

"I'm sorry," I told him.

The next time he called, I dropped everything and went to pick up the tomatoes.

"Someday I will learn how to can these," I threw over my shoulder as I walked down his steps.

Big mistake. I left his house with a pressure cooker, mason jars, and various other cooking gadgets that I did not recognize, and plenty of verbal instructions that I could not memorize.

"If you have any questions call me," he called after me.

After the fourth phone call, the cantankerous old man quipped, "Well dang it, if you're just going to keep me on the phone all day, I guess I better get over there."

We canned all afternoon. He showed me how to carefully remove the lid of the pressure cooker and how the jars weren't ready until the lid settled and popped up. He playfully teased me over the following weeks because I refused to open the colorful jars. I was so proud of them. Every neighbor and close relative had to come look at my canned trophies.

Papaw had quit drinking after his close call with his heart and had started attending a small country church that we also belonged to. Every Sunday and Wednesday night he slicked back his gray hair, donned his blue dress suit, and headed to church. He sat at the end of the pew and we sat beside him. Sometimes my daughters scooted next to him, and he'd place his arm around them or hold them in his lap.

Our church had a photographer come in to take family portraits. Each family sat in a brown wicker chair; Jack was deer hunting, so I sat with the three girls gathered around me. They wore matching black velvet dresses with red belts and red patent leather shoes, and I wore a

rose-colored dress and a very tired expression. Papaw Homer sat alone for his setting and smiled like a distinguished gentleman with his hands folded in his lap. I highly complimented his portrait, and he offered to give it to me. I told him that he should keep it, but to put my name on the back and that would be my inheritance.

Three years after living close to Papaw, Jack decided to move to California. My brother lived in California, and Jack had fallen in love with the popular state during a family visit. I did not want to leave Arkansas or my in-laws. Bobbie had taught me to cook, fold clothes, and how to be a mother. They were my family, and I knew our move would hurt them and leave a huge void in their small family. We moved anyway. Arkansas's time zone is two hours ahead of California's. Papaw Homer could not get that right. When the phone rang at four in the morning, we knew it was him. If Jack answered, Papaw made small talk until he could get to the point. "Is Liz there?" he always asked. Jack just smiled, handed me the phone, and crawled back into bed. His phone calls scared me at first. An elderly southern person normally does not call long distance unless there is a death or a birth in the family. Papaw called because he was lonely, and we talked for quite awhile. I described the pecan orchard where we lived and how we enjoyed eating on the porch every night and watching the sunset over Mount Shasta. He kept me informed on the church members.

"Sister Ruby still sleeps through the service; she says she's not sleeping, just resting her eyes."

"She always says that," I laughed.

"Floyd Jones has a new girlfriend, and he's moving to Oklahoma; don't know who can go fishing with me now. He's making a big mistake; she has two teenagers, and that's what broke me and Rosetta up. Those boys of hers would not listen to anything I said."

We chatted like he was down the road, and I never reminded him that it was four in the morning out here.

We had lived in California for almost two years when my mother-in-law called and told us that Papaw was in the hospital and was not doing well.

I tried calling the hospital and a nurse answered.

"May I have Homer Wright's room?" I asked.

"Wright?" she questioned.

"Right," I answered.

"Alright," she responded, and then we both laughed. I don't know

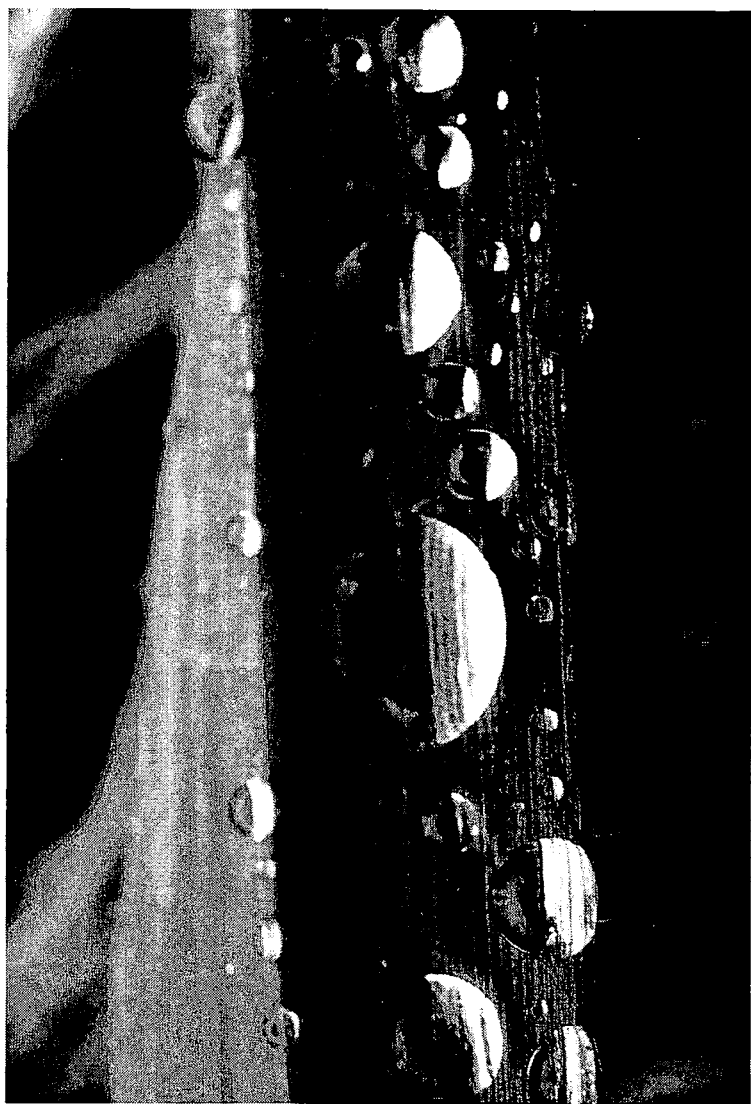
why I remember that.

When he came on the phone, his voice was barely audible. He told me that he was tired and that he was ready to go. I asked him if he could wait two more weeks and told him that we had plane tickets. He said, "No, Liz, I am ready to go." And he was. When we arrived several days after his funeral, my mother-in-law told me that he had sat up in bed and asked, "Where's Liz?" and then laid back down. That was painful, but I know he knew how much I loved him. I had told him several times, and after several years he responded with, "I love you too."

No easy feat for an old country boy.

He has been gone thirteen years, and I still want to pick up the phone and call him. He was not my friend—he was my best friend, and he has never been replaced. As I sit writing this, I glance over at the wall and smile at the portrait of that distinguished gentleman. On the back of the portrait is a note that says, "This goes to Liz when I am gone."

It is one of the few things I kept from my marriage to Jack. He did not leave out any rules when he taught me how to play solitaire.



TUCKER ZITLAW

Along the Sidewalk

While you wake on a soggy day,
watch the rain, murmur
of the falling grey,
you'll find your feelings
change.

Say nothing to the rain
clouds, the mountains, the god
floats above you, that
which you embrace.

Say to the bark of the walnut tree,
clinging to its trunk,
"All hail blind faith."
It takes great pains to believe
in greater names than ourselves.

Say to the crucified fence boards,
"I'm sorry, but your life *was* great,
unfortunately, I hate my neighbors."
And sigh, knowing they will
line all the roads to Rome.

Say something,
stay awake, pray to the god of the grey,
who colors the sidewalk,
like blood in black and white,
with pouring rain.
Pray something.

Picking Up the Ring

She unwrapped it from the coin-shaped
Tissue, and gasped—I too was blinded
By the brightness and the bragging white
Gleam of diamond and pale gold.
She held it out to my finger, as if proposing,
As he had held it that May afternoon,
His hands so earnest, I could do nothing
But agree. And now I am here, asking
This trickster universe—why is there a
Miracle now, that I can again wear this ring,
And love its tightness around my finger?
Or should I ask:

Do you take this man, in his drunkenest hour?
Will he take this woman, crying in the cave of bedsheets?
Do I take this man—the maddening genius, the refuge
Of his mother, the long trilling body of sadness?
Can I bear to hope for more than what's been?
Do I take this woman, ready to charge
headlong into a golden ring,
leaving aside the parts that do not fit?

Perhaps what I want to know is, will you
Hold me down, so I won't disappear. The way you
Did the hour after our daughter was born, swaddled
And weeping—she was an apparition in that moment,
As I feel now, ready to love you again, to give
Disappointment to a dream, to write myself into
Another story with you—and you can rock me,
As the woman at the jewelry counter looks on.
She nods, and nods.

Downtown Hanoi

The drive home was darker than usual; there were no stars and only a hair strand of moon. My uncle drove and smoked hash from a short ivory pipe and listened to hard rock at top volume on the stereo. I sat in a tense silence. I didn't like loud music or the smell of hash, even though I was used to both. He turned down the stereo and said to me, Why you always so nervous? A boy your age shouldn't worry about nothing. It was then I saw the first of the crabs. I saw them before he did and it sent a chill down my spine. I'd heard that under rare conditions crabs will migrate from one side of the marsh to the other in search of saltier and less-polluted water, but this was the first time I'd seen it happen.

As we drove into the crabs, the crunching of the shells grew thicker and my uncle just laughed and laughed and for some reason the bursting shells made my eyes water. The further we drove the more frightened I became. The more frightened I became the more my uncle laughed. You see, my uncle had seen things, or rather, had heard more than was good for him. He'd only been home from Vietnam for about six months. He had served as a radio operator guiding B-52 pilots over their designated targets and attempting to lead them to safety if they were in trouble. He heard men's prayers from way up in the sky and then heard their screams as they went up in smoke and headed straight to the ground. He heard the distant crackle of death, and the voice of guilt as a ton of beautifully wrought silver bombs were dropped on some silent village. He had heard more than most of us—he heard too much—and now those voices were in him and he had become them. He complained of deadness in the mouth, as if he was constantly tasting cardboard or Styrofoam. The incessant smell of burnt copper, he claimed, stayed with him no matter where he was or what he was doing.

We stopped in the middle of the highway and sat in the car in silence and watched the crabs crawl through the headlight beams. He was crying huge whelps of tears. It was the first time I'd seen him cry. My God, he said, I've never seen anything so awful in my life, so beautiful. And then I started crying; I cried because even at that young age I understood that boyhood is not real and there is no such thing as *Patria*.

1975

Pörrbach on Sunday

Where frightened deer climb a land breaking west
barn swallow cries say I've disturbed the peace.
But a German town this small must be seen,
its coat of arms a millwheel, brook, and spade,
pounded to stone at the only crossroad.

Here, women prepare their flowerboxes
for houses of men farming five decades.
If high winds say hawks inherit their fields,
blossoms will race each other into spring
and patient plows outlast abandonment.

DUI

Urgency, on a cold, wet night
as the purifying rain pours
down the gutter and the liquid
warmth that stokes the fire
in my belly adds to the
urgency on this cold, wet night
as the headlights hiss, the
street lights piss and I approach
another intersection fearful
and confused while the cold rain
drips, my demons spin and that
ringing in my ears just adds to the
urgency on a cold, wet night
that began midday on a slow, dogged
despair that's staggering toward
midnight, but it's damn the torpedoes,
full speed ahead, sleepless and
shivering, my cold, wet feet test
for solid ground and I find myself
lost, again!, adding to my
urgency and I declare myself
"Guilty! Your Honor," of drinking
under the influence, so
urgently, again, on a cold, wet
night.

A Confession to Becky

We went to the fair, and I won you a goldfish, so I bought you some goldfish food and a goldfish bowl.

I couldn't wait to see your face when I would show you the bag with the fish swimming all around.

Georgie said it would die if I took it on the Ferris wheel with me. But it didn't die.

I wanted to bring you some cotton candy, too, but I dropped it on the ground...and ate it.

The girls were real pretty at the fair, but I didn't stare, too much. I told Jimmy that you're the only one for me. And you are.

We played hide-and-seek in the funhouse. I got lost, but I told the guys I won because I hid the longest. And they believed me.

I won myself a goldfish, also. And I think I'm gonna name it Becky, after you, my love.

Maybe you should call your goldfish Sweet Pea, and then you could call me your Sweet Pea, too.

The fair closed at midnight, even though us guys weren't tired. But the fair people wouldn't let us stay. So we left.

We decided to go down to the river to drink some whiskey and beer. And get drunk.

They teased me for lovin' you, but I think they're jealous, and I told them it don't matter what they think. Cause I do love you.

I carved BW & SC, our initials, into a tree, with a little fish underneath and a heart all around. And an arrow through it.

The guys tried to get me to throw Becky and Sweet Pea into the river, but I said no. And I didn't.

After one too many shots of Jack Daniel's, the cotton candy ended up on the ground...again. I know you're probably going to worry, but don't.

I went to your house after the river, to give you Sweet Pea. I took the shortcut through the woods, but along the way Sweet Pea's bag ripped.

I tried to plug the hole with my finger, but there wasn't enough water, and the short cut wasn't short enough. And I died.



Sisters

RENÉE SUZANNE MUIR

How Does Your Garden Grow?

Merrill picked at the loosening gimp on the Victorian chair. It wasn't the day, it wasn't the inconvenience, and it certainly wasn't the aging chair that bothered him. Nor was it because Julie wasn't there. And it annoyed him all the more that he couldn't find the reason; couldn't toss whatever it was into a metal office tray marked "outgoing" and be done with it. Be done with the tripping in his stomach that he usually felt eating alone at a lunch counter facing another lunch counter, conscious of tipping soup bowls on a slant away from him and not crushing saltines into crumbs while they were still in their cellophane wrapper. Or when he used to sit in his den reading and had heard his daughter's rubber ball, which he hadn't blown up, slapping the floor in her effort to make it bounce.

*Blue bells,
Cockle shells,
Evie, ivy, over.*

It wasn't that he had to be home listening for sounds of his son (eleven months old the week before!) in the next room. Not those familiar sounds which, because you've heard before, you don't listen for now—such as the light clacking of plastic birds from Mexico suspended in the crib over Joey's head like gulls stretching still on the wind—but those unfamiliar, soft-as-breath changing-rhythm sounds, so quick to fear. As screeching tires.

There had been Saturdays before without Julie; days when she could be Julie whatever-she-wanted and not mother and wife.

"Daddy, let's play ball," Linda had asked. (Had she been seven?)

Julie had gone to play bridge almost every week now for a year. That and the ceramics class at NYU.

Merrill continued his evaluation report as Linda waited.

At his urging, my God, something!

"Will you play ball with me, Daddy?"

Something so she could think things and feel things again.

"We'll see," Merrill answered, still writing.

Other things. Even playing cards and clay.

"Oh, never mind," she said, leaving the room.

Merrill pressed the gimp back into place, got up, crossed the living room, and looked out the front window. (They'd taken a first-floor apartment so they could watch Linda play and be close

by.) Snow was finishing its fall on Central Park and rounding off the corners of New York City. Children sledged and tumbled helter-skelter down the hill like pebbles following a wave back to sea.

"Linda, time to come in," he remembered saying some Christmastime. And Linda had bounded toward him stippled with snow, puffing comic-strip voice balloons into the air. The cold had pinched her cheeks to plum.

"Hi, Da-dee," she had shouted the way she always did when she was excited and happy. She hugged his thighs, almost toppling them both into the snow.

"Easy, easy," he had protested, then, "Feel like a big, Chinese dinner?"

"Oh, boy," she said, taking giant steps across Fifth Avenue, her mittened hand hooked into Merrill's overcoat pocket.

"We're going with Andrew and Eileen Evans; you remember them."

"Oh," Linda had said, slowing to her father's pace.

The dinner was short, though not really. Memory abbreviates forgettables. It was one of those places you were sure was good because the clientele was mostly Chinese—until an Oriental bunny from the local Playboy Club walked in, and the prophecies held within fortune cookies suddenly became suspect.

Eileen Evans was a busy woman, with crossing legs and rubbing fingers, who talked and asked questions and never waited for answers. "Linda, how fresh you look, so rosy. Are you in first grade now? I can almost remember first, or was it second grade, and a boy named Tony Turk who hit girls' toes with a wooden hammer." Linda would almost answer, then look at Merrill, who would almost remind her about not interrupting.

Finally, Andrew Evans, by sheer volume, would wrest the baton from Eileen as in a relay and begin a lap of off-color stories. They were quickies with innuendo punches followed immediately by Andrew's booming laughter and pounding of the table and shivering in the water glasses. He would pause between each and turn to Linda. "Hey, Linda, how you doin' kid? Enjoying the dinner?" And before she could answer, he was off again with another one-liner and a boom and a pound. She looked again at her father who looked as if he were listening, but didn't sound as if he were laughing, even

though his mouth and teeth were shaped that way.

Leaving the restaurant Eileen had said to Julie, "Such a *bright* child."

And Andrew had poked Merrill, saying, "When she's sixteen, are *you* going to have trouble."

On the way home, Linda had quickly picked up Susie Smart, her talking doll. Susie's dialogue and eventual singing of "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star," was of a precise computer delivery. Linda had invented half a dialogue and in the past "conversed" with Susie.

"What's your name?" Linda would ask quickly.

"My name is Susie Smart," came the measured reply.

"How old are you?" mimicked Linda.

"I'm two years old."

"Sing me a song." And Susie would sing. That night, however, Linda pushed Susie's "on" button but didn't talk. She had listened in silence to one whole play-through. As Susie began her repeat, Linda had interrupted.

"My name is Su..."

"Susie Smart, if you don't be quiet I'm going to take away your batteries!"

"...two years old."

"Susie! It's not your Christmas car where you can do and say anything you want."

"...little star, how I wonder what you are."

"Such a *bright* doll," and Linda turned Susie Smart off.

Merrill looked at Julie, whose nose wrinkled in her effort not to laugh. "Enjoy the dinner?" he asked Linda.

"Mmm, okay."

"Did you thank Daddy?" Julie asked in that way which meant, "You know I know you haven't, so thank him, now, please."

"Thank you, Daddy." They turned onto Fifth Avenue and headed north toward Seventy-Second Street.

Merrill smiled to himself. "What do you think of Andrew Evans, Linda?"

"I think..." she began, tilting her head and looking up the way she had seen her mother think, "I think he has too much of a sense of humor without being funny."

"Bravo!" shouted Julie, clapping her gloved hands.

Merrill gave out a long laugh and honked the horn, and Linda leaned over the seat and hugged him.

"Da-dee?"

"Yes, hon."

"Where we goin'?"

"Nowhere."

"Let's go to yeswhere."

"Yeswhere's home," he answered.

"Good." Merrill felt two thumps near his right hand resting on the seat. He picked one up and saw the faint, tinfoiled label, "Eveready Battery."

Merrill turned away from the window looking on Central Park and thumbed through some *Business Weeks* on a magazine stand.

"Ollie-Ollie-All-In-Free," Linda had called when the lawn had just been mowed on a spring afternoon visit to friends in New Rochelle. (She'd been seven then too, hadn't she?)

Merrill tried to clear his throat of the heartburn there and flipped to an article on Howard Hughes.

"Da-dee, Da-dee, come play hide-and-seek."

Merrill scanned the upside-down icicles of a gross profit graph.

"A little later, hon," he had answered.

"But, it's fun, Da-dee."

He dropped the magazine and began looking about the room in drawers and shelves for a roll of Tums.

"Daddy! Mommy says people don't burp!"

"Your Mommy's right, absolutely right, Linda," he had answered. They'd walked on through several more aisles of the Farmers Market, skirting angled trays of more fresh colors than Merrill had ever seen. It had been a summer vacation in Los Angeles.

"Then why do you burp?" she'd finally asked.

"Because Daddy *has* to burp." They passed a counter of brownish, ripened bananas hanging from a beam in clusters like baseball gloves.

"Why do you *have* to burp?"

Merrill bought a cup of coffee, sipped, and watched one of the Market buildings ripple like a flag in the coffee cup's reflection.

"Huh, Daddy?"

"Linda, will you just drop the subject! Burping is one of those things men and daddies do." He had felt pretty silly about *that* generalization and supposed, in passing, that one day she would ask a boyfriend why he *didn't* burp.

They stopped at a pet store and watched a hamster double its size by stuffing half a carrot down its side.

"Ouu," Linda wrinkled her nose, "what's *that*?"

"A hamster."

"What's a hamster?"

"A rodent," Merrill answered.

"What's he do, clean roads?"

They had laughed and held hands and gone to buy fresh apples. Merrill took a bite, breathed deeply, and looked down at Linda just as the sun was settling onto the horizon and turning her head to an orange glow. He lightly touched her hair and smiled and looked around to see if anyone was noticing that she was his daughter with such lovely hair that he could touch.

On the way back to the hotel in the car they finished the apples. Linda hoisted herself to her knees and scrunched over to Merrill.

"Apple core!" she yelled.

"Baltimore!" he answered.

"Who's your friend?"

Merrill touched her on her nose still moist with apple juice, "You!"

"But, tomorrow's my birthday," she said in mock hurt.

"And tomorrow your birthday cake will be delivered to our hotel room."

"Gee, that sure is nice of them."

"No, sweetheart, it's *our* treat."

"Oh."

"It's very pretty. Pink and white icing. And it says 'Happy Birthday, Linda.'"

"All by itself?"

Merrill laughed and flicked the signal indicator. "All by itself."

"Dee-donk, dee-donk, dee-donk," Linda said.

"What?"

"The turning thing says that. Look, Daddy, now I'm happy," she smiled, "now I'm sad," and she pouted, all in time to the signal indicator. "Now I'm happy, now I'm sad."

Merrill found himself smiling and pouting in opposite time to Linda's smiles and pouts which made her laugh and lose the rhythm.

"Daddy?"

"Yes, hon."

"If Mommy dies when I'm twenty-three, will you marry me?"

Merrill chewed two tablets and walked quickly into the kitchen, hoping the sight of food might make him hungry and get rid of the Tums taste. He opened the refrigerator door and considered English muffins, non-fat milk, and gingerbread with shredded coconut.

Linda had come crying into their bedroom early one morning, her straight, silky hair outlining her face and curving under her chin like parentheses.

He decided on pink grapefruit.

Her Mickey Mouse Club hat was askew, the ears bouncing slightly as she cried.

He sliced it in half and began gouging out the seeds.

She waved one of the two television antennas over the bed where they were asleep. "Daddy, it broke off and there's no picture."

Flicking them onto the plate.

"Please fix it, I can't see anything."

"Later hon," he'd mumbled from within the clamp of a hangover.

Some propelled beyond the plate, hitting the table, sticking.

"They look like chewed chewing gum," Linda had said, pinching the seeds one morning before school.

"Um-hmm." Merrill had continued eating his grapefruit, wishing waking up would happen faster. Julie poured his coffee while Linda arranged various-shaped, wax-papered packages in her lunch pail with Mission Pack snugness.

"Your hair's a mess, Daddy."

"Um-hmm."

"And turning very grey," added Julie.

"Why's it turning grey?"

"Because Daddy's getting older than Mommy," Julie smiled.

Merrill looked from one to the other, trying to function.

"Now, listen you two..." he began without conviction.

"Want me to teach you the Oliver Twist, Daddy?"

"Give me a chance to wake..."

"I was only kidding, anyway," Linda said, snapping her lunch pail shut. Then she brushed some cheese crumbs on the table into a small pile. "Daddy, where do mice live?"

"Mice."

"...mice live?"

"In cities. Like New York."

"Where in cities?"

"Walls. Basements. Like that."

Linda brushed the crumbs into her hand and poured them into a saucer, smiling to herself all the while.

"What's funny?" Merrill asked.

"Wouldn't it be funny if the mice had a parade? Right down the wall? With horns and flutes and things? They'd wake everybody up. Even you, Daddy?"

Merrill stopped eating...looked over to Julie. "I resent that. I mean I really do. How can she be that awake that easily? I'm older than she is. Why should she have a corner on the wake-up-right-away market? It's a kid's conspiracy, that's what!" He slowly turned to Linda and smiled. "Ohhh," he said through a long breath, "Linda, Linda, won't you tell Daddy? What's your secret? Why do you have flowers in your garden, and I have weeds in mine?"

Julie came over and hugged her. "Because she's so new at being alive and finding out things. Because today's a first time and not just more of yesterday. And it's all very exciting and in a hurry to be six and then seven and then eight."

"And then twenty-three," Linda chimed in.

"And then...twenty-three," repeated Julie, walking her to the back door. Then she crouched down and buttoned Linda's coat up warm around her neck. "When you get home this afternoon, hon, you mustn't forget to water your potatoes."

"Fred and Ned all right?" Linda asked.

"Fred and Ned are very thirsty. They grow very fast, and I know you don't want them to die."

"Will they die?"

"It you don't water them they will."

Linda fidgeted with the latch on her lunch pail. "Mommy?"

"Yes."

"Can I go water them now?"

Merrill squeezed the juice from the half grapefruit into the spoon and watched most of it spill onto the plate.

Had it been that day? (It occurred to him that everything he remembered was when she was seven.)

He tried again, holding the spoon tighter.

"Daddy, let's play ball," Linda had always asked.

Squeezing the grapefruit harder.

"We'll see," he had always answered.

Now most of the juice missed the spoon entirely, spattering on the plate.

"Daddy, you always say, 'we'll see,'" she had answered on that particular day.

He dropped the spoon and grapefruit half on the table. Just dropped them and watched his hands.

"And that means 'no!'" She had run out of the apartment, slamming the front door behind her.

Merrill brought his hands down on the table, breaking the plate and sending the spoon jangling to the floor.

It had been that day.

His head lowering down on his knuckles.

She'd run out. Screeching tires.

"Let's go to yeswhere."

Pressing on his knuckles.

A small muffled bump, such a slight, harmless sound that had been, the sound of a snowball hitting the side of your car while country driving.

"Look, Daddy, now I'm happy, now I'm sad."

Pressed white into his forehead.

Then that silence, that silence for which there is no measure to give it a length of time—when children's playing all up and down the street stops, and buses hissing rear doors open stops, and dogs barking at far-off sirens stops—that silence that lasts so long it extends beyond seconds by hours. Merrill first stood still waiting for sound, then walked slowly to the door feeling that this deliberate slowness would turn clocks back to conversations and give him time to change the words, would deny what he knew couldn't have happened beyond that door.

"Wouldn't it be funny if the mice had a parade? Right down the wall? With horns and flutes and things?"

Then he'd thrown that door open and run down the stairs, having to find out if it was what it couldn't have been, but was. But nonetheless, what had to be, was.

He remembered being suddenly there over her, not there,

watching, not seeing people standing still, hearing, not hearing his neighbors muffled voices at a distance or the six o'clock bells from the corner church. Then, after awhile, as things began to move slowly, he had leaned down and seen, seen what he'd always loved so much in the past, his daughter asleep, the moist warmth coming from under the bedcovers, the sweet, even breath. He waited. He watched. There was no warmth. There was no breath. Seven years so fast. There was white moving around and a long stretcher that gently took her away.

Then the silence began to end and sound pushed into him again. There were men's questions and women crying while they held Linda's friends and kept touching their hair. There were cabs that streaked by yellow with backseat people laughing and sleeping. There was a bus's hissing as Julie got off and walked in her brisk way toward them, then slowly as she saw Merrill. And then she ran to him as she had never seen him look that way. The men and women left in their own directions as Merrill guided her to their door, holding her about the shoulders, and Julie asking, "Merrill? Merrill?" and him saying, "Inside. Please. Come." and her saying, "Why, Merrill? What is it?" and finally screaming, "Merrill, tell me," at the door. And the street was emptied as it grew dark.

In the days and months to follow, Merrill had brought home jonquils and azaleas to Julie, had taken her to French antique shows, called at mid-morning for lunch dates, sent her Contempo Cards as if every day were Valentine's Day, had even bought her a mod suit and called her "mini-bopper." A year later Joey had been born. That had been good. That and the bridge game every Saturday and the ceramics class every Thursday night, and Julie had accepted. Not forgotten, but accepted.

Merrill heard the front door close.

"Home, darling. Won a dollar-ten, if you'd believe it." She stopped at the kitchen door, saw the broken saucer, the spoon on the floor, the half grapefruit, the way Merrill was looking. She listened. And heard Joey's sounds and the plastic birds. Then she went to Merrill and held him from behind the chair, closed her eyes, her cheek next to his, felt its dampness.

"Why didn't you say something?" she asked softly.

"I don't..."

"Why didn't you call?"

"I...I had no idea," he answered.

"I wouldn't have gone. You know that."

"I know. It...it just happened." He brought her face around to his.

"It's all right now. Really."

"Sure?"

"Yes."

"Can I get you something?"

"I...I think I'll look in on Joey."

Julie watched as Merrill left the room, then removed her coat and put down her bag. She heard Joey's giggling and went to the door of his room. Merrill sat on the floor next to Joey's crib, legs crossed, flicking a tennis ball toward him, which Joey promptly batted back at his father, sometimes hitting his father's nose between the slats. When Merrill flew back in mock pain, Joey let out marvelous horse laughs and turned beet red.

"C'mon, Joey," Merrill flicked the ball.

"Atta boy," as it came flying back.

"You're doin' fine."

"You get a little older, and we'll play every single weekend."

"Yes sir!"

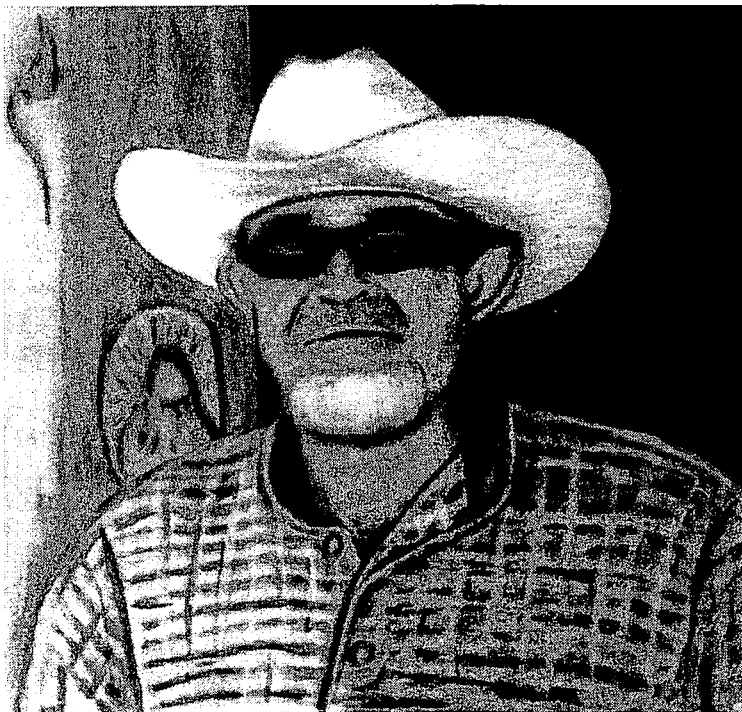
"Would you like that?"

"Hey, Joey," Merrill held the ball up. "Wanna play ball?"

And Joey pounded the mattress.

"Okay," and he let it roll to him.

Julie rested her head against the side of the door.



Javier de Rancho Punta Conejo

BRUCE MATTHES

How Does It Feel?

The splintering of bone
Tearing of muscle
Melting of flesh
The crimson line that separates the skin.

The soft crackling of a drawn cigarette.
Ice hitting the bottom of a glass like the far right keys on a piano
Followed by a flowing amber river of fire.
Razorblades tapped on a stagnant mirrored pond
The cacophony of slamming doors.
Deep sound of heavy boots.
The patter of small feet from carpet to linoleum.
Snarling whisper.
The loud crash of overturned furniture.
Swishing arms, moving to cover the face.
Rushing of blood to inflate dark balloons around the eyes.

The tiptoeing of the late-night-sneaky uncle
In the hall outside the door.
Ripping of pajamas
The grating of day-old stubble on a smooth cheek
Flowers crushed under feet.
Stomachs knotting heavy with guilt.
The deafening silence of secrets.

Click and the dial tone.
The bouncing of a ring down the street, into the gutter.
The moan of satisfaction of your lover
With another.
In your bed.
Crumpling of perfumed letters in tear-soaked fists.
The hissing disappearance of love
Like wisps of steam.

The screech of late-braking car tires.
Morse code of life
That ends in one long beep.
The muffled sound of uneven breath in a damp and briny blanket.
Dirt hitting wood from six feet above.

Prescott Hardly Explained

Roots of dead junipers grip this soil hard.
When drought sparked piñon forests to kindling
you volunteered to man the watchtowers
where late spring winds trundled past crumbling slopes.
The next wildfire's fifty-percent contained
if shovels stay ahead of abandoned campfires.
When you unraveled maps of forest roads
remembered vaguely—like the names of whores,
the wine that filled your aching skull each night
left daylight shredding you with bright contempt.

With the last firebreak in rear-view mirrors
the town returns to yard sales and picnics,
with fields marked off for magic afternoons.
As smiles and back-slaps mean neighbors breathe calm,
friends wonder how you could leave them again.
But they never notice how your hands shake
so oddly when your losses take you home,
or reasons you desert companionship
with softballs rising to cheers of summer,
young girls' hair flying prodigal in wind.

One-Night Stand

Fumbling drunkenly with my shirt,
His pants
Hastily—
Blind to each other in the shadows
Seeing one another with our bodies
Relying on touch
In the night, in my space
Better this way to hide
Our faults and insecurities
That seem to thrive in the light
—My dimpled thighs
—His fleshy waist
I fear discovery on my prickly, unshaven legs
Stranger beside me—
Stranger inside me
Sweaty bodies tangled, meshed together
Secured only by false intimacy
He is no longer a stranger to me,
But knows my temple well—
In the shameful way the lust and booze allow
And when I wake, a nameless face
With unfamiliar legs
Lay naked, sprawled carelessly next to me
And I remember all too clearly

Out Standing in His Field

I have been trying to sell this farm for six years without much luck. Whenever anyone asks how much it costs, I say, "Everything," and they look lost. Well, not everything, I say, but a lot. The gaze that comes over their face tells me they're wondering whether I'm crazy or not. Sometimes they stay and talk, more. I tell them, I've worked this farm for 16 years, it has been a chore, from one end to the other. Out there, in that field, is where I buried my horse and two favorite dogs. I planted those fruit trees, cherry and pear, I say. And over there is where my son hanged himself on Christmas Day. If they stay they usually ask, "How's the plumbing?" and I say, there's a tub upstairs that runs hot and cold. It's rust red, the pipes are old, and the door doesn't latch. There are still scratches on it, if you saw, that my wife made trying to claw her way out. It's off its hinges now. It has a brand new roof and the cellar is bone dry. And there's a well where my youngest fell, and died, playing hide and seek. And the pump has a leak. There's an extra room in the barn where my brother stayed most of his life, before he ran off with my wife. I don't know why. Buyers come and go and nobody makes an offer on the place, and well, I just don't understand why this old farm won't sell.

Concepción Sunset

Sitting in the lounge car after dinner, a fellow diner beside, I see our Coast Starlight's finally left Vandenberg, which owns about a tenth of the county. Vandenberg, infamous for its prison and missiles that fail. The pictorial lies elsewhere: looking down at Point Arguello lighthouse then beyond, I'm stunned mute by the beauty of the curve the coast makes southwest toward the point—sweet golden-rose tones on the bare faces and woolly chaparral backs of the sandstone cliffs curving downcoast fifteen miles as the sun settles into fogbank.

The seacliff's cut by cañadas and barrancas with names surprising as spicy mints: Agua Viva, del Rodeo, de los Sauces, del Jolluro, Long Horn Cañada, and Espada—this last forms the entrance to Jalama, the surfers' delight and only public-access beach in this part of the state. Then we're running past Black Canyon and onto Concepción itself.

Point Conception, sacred to the Chumash—they called this place the western gateway, where dead souls began their celestial journey to paradise, *Similagás*. Cabrillo, in 1542, named the point Cabo del Galera because he thought it looked like a galley. I tell the woman beside me how the train will turn now, seeming a steeper south but in fact heading almost due east. "Oh," she cries, "I don't want to leave the coast," and I assure her that we won't. The coast bends east too, so that over on 101 people think they're driving south all the way to Santa Barbara when that left they hook after the tunnel turns them east as well. "Look at a map," I say, "you'll see the land forms what old-timers call *the elbow*."

I glance down, making an entry in my notebook—my neighbor's exclamation of fear and delight causes me to look up just in time to see a dozen wild boar looking up at us through the incoming dusk. They cling to the cliffside flora underfoot like miners on bivouac, looking consumed with the need for—everything. Glaring at us, stamping the white-flowering iceplant as if ready to take on the whole damned train. This makes me remember Noel Young's friend—the poet and dancer, Richardson—who was known throughout the county for hunting wild boar with bow and arrow, but I don't say anything to my companion because the idea sickens some people.

More tiny communities sparkle in the fading light—some boogie-wannabes, others little more than hippie enclaves, and all with wonderful names—Honda, Sudden, Conception (spelled like that and just inland from the point), Gato, Saint Augustine, Drake, Sacate and Tajiguas—this last just north of Refugio beach. As an insomniac kid in rural Riverside County, I enjoyed listening to the late news—the last part of the weather report always began with the alluring alliteration Fruit-Frost Service forecast, as the distant voice boomed out the geographic flourish, “Point Conception to the Mexican border.” Especially I loved the phrase *the dew point* without really understanding it, a technical term that relates the amount of water in the air to air temperature. Growers paid close attention, because this measure of relative humidity told them when they’d have to fire up the smudge pots in their orange groves—this in the days before the term *smog* existed, or much understanding of its consequences. Now growers use giant twin-bladed fans, mechanical gods whirring their metallic tai chi throughout the state.

We continue on our diesel way as dusk flirts with, then becomes, night, plowing past Alcatraz Beach just beyond Gaviota, then Refugio, where the late thespian president had his photo-op “ranch” five miles up the draw, paid for by the big-bucks guys that pimped him. Men who don’t serve but *take*—who rob the poor and take the children of the poor to fight their wars, and *die*—grown men that keep grabbing and never seem to have enough, like children drowning in chocolate, lumbering toward oblivion on a runaway train.

Nightfall now, and we’re running on Elwood, where, in early 1942 a nutso Japanese commander took his sub to the surface and lobbed two shells into the two-well “oil field” there and scurried offshore, then resurfaced to radio Tokyo, “Santa Barbara in flames!” There’s a man on the train tonight who says he was in Naval Intelligence back then. “We wanted to talk to that guy real bad,” he said, “but his sub was hit off New Guinea later in the war and went down quick. *Too* quick.” A good story teller, better than any of those sunken-cheeked old guys I remember from childhood train rides—World War I vets that sat in Pullman car vestibules, legs crossed, showing funny-patterned silk socks as they smoked and hacked, talking, talking, smoking, and hacking.

And even the impressionable child I was eventually understood that the desultory trajectory their raps took from griping about the petty routines of military life to lame hyperbole to simple wish was stone boredom. For “the war”—the travel as much as anything else—was the best thing that ever happened to them, because it was the only thing that had happened. I wondered, now, what it meant to them that they lived and others had died.

And I felt life running again on two distinct tracks, one slow and contemplative that took a quick forever and whose destination was nowhere except between the ears. I understood I’d always tried to stay off that road, avoid having to find answers to the hard-guy questions everyday life presented. And an express rode the other track, where all those snags tossed aside became a steaming fountain that required immediate action before everything human you valued boiled over and spilled out of control.

I realized we’d be in Santa Barbara in minutes and felt the desire to spend the stop there in some significant way. I remembered the great fig tree at the southwest corner of PCH and Chapala—I hadn’t seen it in years, didn’t know if it still lived. But when the train stopped, I walked directly through the dry night air in exactly the right direction and there it was, its elephant color and limbs still spreading luxuriantly, a sinewy palace of longevity and memory.



Andada de Las Olas

BRUCE MATTHES

Home at Last

The elderly Nazi sits in the patio at the nursing home
he takes off his slippers and puts them back on
there is a comforter over his legs
and he fidgets with the threads of his blanket
then with the sleeves of his sweater.
When the nurse takes him to dinner,
he lifts his feet so they do not drag
and keeps his hands folded on his lap.
On one side sits a lady who used to be a gypsy
The caretaker is gay and lifts
the glass to help him drink.
On his other side is a retired rabbi.
They are a family that no longer talks at mealtime.

Flowers for Cops

Where the cops' shadows had fallen in my garden
when they took her to hell from heroin's heaven,
needle still warm and wet like her other hunger,
their grim silhouettes seared and shriveled seed and shoot,
even weeds withered; and where they'd touched the trees' limbs
gall and canker writhed and gnarled. Their maggot fingers
squirmed obscenities on angry resisting flesh,
while turd-dark glasses wiggled like wings on night's bats
sucking out what in humans would have been their eyes.
Their voices like vomit, their feet like rabid rats,
savaged the bewildered grass.

Pain's language softens as spirit's scars harden.
Later, when I wept there, coward with clenched fists,
clenched fists now where once a silent coward stood,
oh, Christ, my raining tears wombed the wounded earth,
seeds shuddered and seedlings sieved the salined soil.
Burst forth in time and sun a riot of bloom,
a bees' carnival of pistil and petal,
a breeze-busied canvas of perfume and hues,
bouquets galore, bouquets for the days we use
flowers for the heart's adjectives, for hearts' hopes—
and, yes, even for cops' graves.

Along the Fence

Along the fence,
we walk together on different sides.
Mist has kissed the blades of grass,
blessed our feet, our dewy imprints.
There is no sky,
just a carved line—
 Stretching up and over the hill.

Our fingers hovering, almost touching,
we feel the prick of splinters,
 the sharpness of each point.
This old fence,
I pounded the nails in so long ago.
The boards found each other,
intersected, and grew.
I will pierce this roughness,
 Tear it down.

Stretching up and over the hill,
crumbled piles of dust, and wood—
 sparks jump from the dead boards,
 lighting my way back to where you stand.

In this wide open space
the rush of breath,
the rise of smoke,
 light little fires in the sky.

Where the Sea Breaks its Back

*for Robert Hass, Josef Clifford,
& Jeanne Clark: without you three,
my voice would be missing.*

1.

If I was comfortable enough
with my own squelched dreams
to kiss your Fisher King wound away,
I could say
nonchalantly over teriyaki chicken pitas,
or your al dente *Rice-A-Roni*,
“I never knew the man whose sperm created me either.
Went down so many men,
blindly fishing for one to say
‘you’re okay’ and never want to walk away.
And

I

love you . . .”

But like Parsifal, my emotions castrate me;
ignored anima too long to ask pertinent questions.
When your Germanic Grail is close at hand
I want to reach out and touch your holy soul,
but forget the magic words.
You dissipate like a dream,
and I’m alone,
wondering will I ever be released from this curse.

I may not be repeating my mistakes,
but the past is still present in my rhyme.
Whom does it serve?
The answer chimes:

this is my song.

2.

Not having a father left me free to be the man I wanted.

Never never wanted to be a man.

Never wanted to conquer and pillage,
depleting villages of natural resources,
annihilating natives—

whistling while they work:

“The pirate’s life for me.”

I could never land balanced on those peg legs.

Men have almost always been myths to me,

fairy tales; Charming, Valiant,

unlike the crew of abusive rascallions

that taught this innocent fool to run from emotions,

as if they were monstrous whales waiting to swallow me,

like Spanish and English did native tongues

or Christianity, gutting the hearts and brains of Spirituality.

A tricky dic- hot- o- my,
wanting men

yet fearing them with the same tongue.

Repeatedly awakening to forced feedings,

gagging for life while half asleep.

I learned to stay

awake until after he came,

only then could I rest.

Falling asleep isn’t easy;

ritualistically anticipating arrival of ghosts.

Resorting to courting newer versions of him,

with girlfriends and wives who’ll never know

the secrets I swallow,

to be forgotten seconds after.

Solitary tears that reconfirm my fear:

only here to be used.

Concentrating, like Antonius Block playing chess with death,
not for his life, but its meaning,

and I can’t believe I’ve made an idol of my fear.

The prayers you taught me kept me on my knees,

but I’m ready to baptize and proclaim my manhood.

Love is not the blackest of all plagues—greed is.

3.

When I sleep alone, my bed seems as spacious as Alaska.

My back broke
when my last love left.

Last time someone walks all over me.

Glaciers of grief collide with my brief happy existence.

When it's this cold,

I hibernate,

sitting alone in my mental igloo with memories snowflaking around—
the love, like oil, buried beneath whales of white—
memories of him holding me
down out of sight.

Memories of him dancing
on my shoulders as I carried him North.
Memories of all the lies.

4.

I would never abandon my passion for you.

As I lay here,
unwaveringly staring at your closed eyes,
imagining I'm in your dreams,
I smile.

Your bleached blonde head feeds starved brown eyes
as my hope dares to romanticize a life only written in fiction.

But I don't just want you on the page:

I want the saliva, snot, and cum of you, too.

I want to view the you yet to be.

I want you to want me.

I want to be enough for you; enough for me.

Wanting too much.

Can't abandon feeling inadequate:

Daddy didn't care to see what would become of me;
on my knees, bent to please, risking deadly disease.

Mom neglected me as I reflected her lost life.

She was Heart's Sorrow.
I cried for stability and affection as she screamed for peace and quiet—
not some sniveling brat.
“Mommy's off for the night”
wants to watch her shows,
or run with wolves,
lie in bed, good as dead.
Which is why my eyes are glued to you—
too afraid you'll dematerialize like all the guys gone quick as they come:
two minutes isn't enough time to learn what vegetables they like,
let alone worth pain in ass.

“You captured my soul with your eyes,” you scribbled
“and when you blink, I may not exist.” Never before
have I discovered a sight as healing as you.
My third eye remembers you from before,
when we were unhappily wed, and you slept with my sister instead,
like water for chocolate.
Or the time before when you were my mistress: we died,
my jealous wife shot us. Aren't we still fighting the same battle?
Karma brings us together,
but we choose the path that gets us here:
cheating binds us to repeating our mistakes lifetime after lifetime.

It feels like it's time to choose the less traveled,
hidden, threatening, but so worth winding path.

I blink, but you're still here; closer than before.

5.

Teach a man to write and he'll live forever.
Fishing, or poetry, it's all the same:
I cast my rod at your universe
angling for your point of view,
looking to discover you—
not like Columbus, but with wide eyes of infants—
every little nibble baits me with happiness.
What you make me feel is what I imagine
Grandma felt when thinking of God—
infinite.

What a beautiful, seductive potion.

Your eyes are islands surrounded by dark waters.
I want to dive into them, search for sunken treasure;
fondling your jewels would be Absolut fun.

Your lips budding tulips: tight-lipped, fancy-free.
The words you speak, nectar I digest, vomit into honey.

Your ears parabolic satellites picking up unbroadcast signals
with accuracy that would embarrass the Pentagon.
I want to flick my tongue at them as I whisper Reese's Pieces and
Dorito nothings,
seductively igniting your appetite.

Your fuzzy stomach, a Peruvian mountain begging to be explored.
Would I find ancient bones?
Would I stumble upon Machu Picchu?
Would I see an exotic snake swallowing eagle eggs?
Or wrapping tightly around some post-Incan boy's legs?
I don't need a machete, there's nothing to fear.

Your feet, arches protecting paths I want to travel.
Can't help but follow your footsteps,
leading me to answers I've been seeking since I began crawling.

Your shoulders constantly busy carrying and comforting.
I can't believe you lift so much without breaking a sweat.
Longing for the day I can lean on you for pleasure.

Your body a mystery I have to solve.
A poem I want to write.
A song I need to sing.
A prayer to recite.
A light at the end of a dark life.



LYNN H. RICH

Enduring the Altar Valley

for Walt McDonald

It scorns the faith your grandfather lived by
won't turn engines of commerce now, that man
whose skin ran fissured like cottonwood bark
as he counted losses cruel in liquor.

Hearsay mixed with fable breeds a rancher,
a breed nearly extinct as knight-errants,
though you swear wind and stone are no defeat.
But to hedge bets at the next Lord's Prayer,
ranchers don't dare this range without pliers,
just to be sure daily bread stays fenced.

Maybe this land has gone the way of Cain.
What you build, city dwellers vandalize,
old cars and tractors plundered for spare parts
as emigrants carve trails across ranchland
where some fool dumped oleander cuttings—
six leaves can kill a horse, or newborn calf.
Children of ranchers forswear this business.
They've seen the way land overtakes men
when floods and wildfires have long earned tenure,
and peace of mind comes frail as April ice.

Twelve Feet

I was driving home one day
And took the long way around,
Or the scenic route,
Or I just got lost.
So I stopped to ask directions,
And I also had to pee.
I walked inside this diner;
Tom's I think it was.
A farmer at the counter started talking.

My name is Lee, he said.
Hi, I said.
Have you ever seen a two-headed chicken?
No, I said.
They lay eggs with two yolks. Did you know that?
And you can charge twice as much, I said.

We went on like this for half an hour,
Until I asked where the bathroom was.
Then he spoke of his outhouse.
The hole was six feet deep.
The turlet, as he called it,
Was in a closet,

On a platform

Six feet high.

Cuts back on the splash back, he said.
Yuck, I said.
He woke up one morning,
And his wife wasn't in bed.
He figured she was making breakfast,
Or milking cows, or getting eggs.
So he started his morning ritual
And went to the outhouse.
He pulled down his trousers,
Sat down on the can,
And heard a voice say,
"There's a full moon out tonight!"
He had left the seat up
And she's as skinny as a rail.
She fell down that twelve-foot hole

And had a foul,
Wet,
Landing.

Took the whole day to get her out of there, he said.

I bet.

She hasn't smelled the same since.

Ew, I said.

So after I peed,

I put down the seat,

Even in the men's room

Of this greasy spoon.

The Band

The bar bustles like the many skirmishes of gnats at dusk.

The anticipation of night.

Quiet but alive.

The tin-

ti-

nab-

u-

lat-

ions of bootleg liquor bottles colliding.

Glass wind chimes clink without a wind's suggestion.

Wush hush shush of people's conversations about the weather,

Or whatever.

The band takes the stage.

Cords crackle with electricity, humming life into inanimate objects.

The mic chirps:

"Good evening ladies and gentlemen, we're called *The Apocalypse*...
1...2...3...4"

The bass drum is thumping now; the gnats have made amends.

Whatever people were talking about before is unimportant.

Tsst tsst tsst tsst pop tsst tsst tsst tsst pop the snare and high-hat are tortured.

The slap of the bass resonates and fills the bar, vibrating everything,
even souls.

The singer's mouth looks like an old fence where only the gilded and
gray gate

Remains Neighbor-less. The rest of the fence has long since
deteriorated.

Two lone gates remain.

The gravel truck unloads and most wouldn't call it beautiful, but
Enchanting maybe.

The guitar bays at the moon like a pack of wild coyotes,
Whining for satisfaction, then finding it.

Waaaa Waaa

Like the whistle of a freight train, the harmonica pierces my skull.

Tap, tapping of feet on the ground rises to a tremendous clamor.

If you listen

You can hear the sweat trickle down midnight hair and drop to the
ground.

Like the sound of manacles hitting fertile dirt.



Rave

BRUCE MATTHES

My Old Orange Cat

Will inevitably die.
He has given up
His hunt for mice or mole:
Grotesque porch-deposits
That once justified his keep
When there was little money
Left for *ridiculous wastefulness*,
As my ex would say.

Now, despite frequent feeding—
Canned food, chopped liver,
Chicken bits, cheese—
I can feel his bones: stiff as dead
Cedar twigs precariously clinging
To his still-living trunk.

At the start of the decline,
I was harsh with discipline
For his misuse of my potted-plant soil,
His unexplainable three a.m. yowlings.
Not until my own bladder
Began to obey
The slightest sneeze
Rather than self-will,
Did I become more forgiving.

Forced to confront the inevitable,
I daily scoop his waste
From a litter box in the bedroom,
Remembering how proud
We both used to be.

Letting Out the Smoke

The suede leather shape of his foot
in a cowboy boot I can not fill
calloused fingers trickle
over the stiff steel strings
of an old college acoustic
I hold the lyrics shaky
let the rhythm settle around me
mixed with the sour smoke
from a cigarette smoldering
in the chipped ashtray

I played with him once,
but the steel stubbed my fingers,
left me sucking my sores
beneath the layer of smoke
that separated us.

In summer
we let the smoke out,
sway the backyard hammock
to the timing of his tune.
The lawn tickles my feet as
pink lemonade cringes
wonderfully between teeth.
The summer rhythm
Always settles sweet.

Adrian Aguilar

Adrian Aguilar is currently enrolled in creative writing classes at CSU, Chico. He is also currently completing a collection of poetry and personal essays, titled 77, and a novel titled *the O door*, both based on his experience with sexual abuse and Disassociative Identity Disorder.

Jeffrey Alfier

Jeffrey Alfier has published in *California Quarterly*, *Concho River Review*, *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, *Pacific Review*, *Penumbra*, *RE:AL*, *Reed*, and *Watershed*. He lives in Schwedelbach, Germany.

Cheryl Battles

Cheryl Battles is a graduate of Chico State's English department and a teacher at Butte College.

Erin Boteler

Erin Boteler was born and raised in southern Maryland. She is a junior English major concentrating on poetry at the University of Maryland, College Park, and is on exchange for one semester at Chico State. She says, "I started writing poems when I was ten and have not been able to stop since."

Louis E. Bourgeois

Louis E. Bourgeois was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, to a working class family and raised primarily in New Orleans East. At the age of 18, a serious car accident resulted in the loss of his left arm. He says, "This led me to the gifts that reading and writing have to offer. In a certain sense, writing has given me a new life." In 1996, he earned a BA in English and was the first graduate of the University of Mississippi's MFA program in creative writing in 2002. Currently, he's an English instructor at Rust College in Holly Springs, Mississippi. He has published poems in such journals as *The Southern Review*, *Parnassus*, *The Oxford American*, and *Tundra*. His most recent collection of poems, *Olga*, was a finalist in the CustomWords Poetry Book Contest in 2004 and will be published in 2005 by WordTech.

Jack Conway

Jack Conway is the author of two books of poetry, *My Picnic with Lolita and Other Poems* (2004) and *Life Sentences* (2002) published by North Country Press, Providence, Rhode Island. He is also the author of *American Literacy: Fifty Books that Define Our Culture and Ourselves* published by William Morrow. His poems have appeared in *The Antioch Review*, *The Columbia Review*, *Light*, *Rattle*, *Stickman*, *Yankee*, *Floating Holiday*, *The Nantucket Review*, *Edgar Magazine*, and the *Norton Anthology of Light Verse*, among others. His poem, "The Argamemon Rag" will appear in the summer 2005 issue of *Poetry* magazine. He teaches writing at Bristol Community College in Fall River, Massachusetts.

Stacey Coveyou

Stacey Coveyou is a senior at Chico State working towards a BA in English with a minor in sociology. She is a recovering Pepsi addict who resides with her sister, sponsor, and fellow addict, Ally. She has a weakness for thrift stores and scary movies. Her poem "One-Night Stand" was written while wearing leopard-print slippers.

Stephen Tea Davis

Stephen Tea Davis, 76, San Francisco State graduate (1955), former Chico State graduate student, and great-grandfather, is a bipolar disciple of Dylan Thomas and Jack Daniel. Notwithstanding a stent in his left coronary artery, his forté is still self-indulgence.

Sanford Dorbin

Sanford Dorbin lives in Chico. He has had work in earlier issues of *Watershed*.

Ralph Dranow

Ralph Dranow's poetry book, *Sunday Ritual*, won first prize in *Nerve Cowboy's* 2000 chapbook contest. He worked for many years in bookstores and is now starting an oral history business. He lives in Oakland, California, with his wife, writer Naomi Rose.

S. Lee Funk

S. Lee Funk states, "Every night I shiver with anticipation. Long since, I have ceased to wonder for what."

Elizabeth Furner

Elizabeth Furner is an employee with the Butte County Sheriff's Office and part-time student at Butte College. She says, "My writing was cast aside when I became a mother. After the death of my daughter, I received an e-mail that stated, 'Some of us go to our graves with the music still inside us.' Inspired, I began writing again."

Corey Gruber

Corey Gruber is a senior in English and is also pursuing a minor in creative writing at Chico State. Both subjects perpetually interest him, and he hopes to pursue them in graduate studies. He is employed part-time by a well-known electronics corporation which, he says, "has offered me an advantageous perspective on many political, social, and economic doings that may or may not affect some of the ethical, moral, and societal ills my writings try to remedy."

Suzan Jantz

Suzan Jantz is a CSU, Chico senior (again), majoring in English with a creative writing minor and certificate in editing and publishing. She is currently working on a poetry honors thesis with Professor Jeanne E. Clark. Her work has appeared in *Watershed* and *Sinister Wisdom*.

M. Jay Livingston

After his education at The High School of Music and Art and Kenyon College (an English major with a minor in psychology), M. Jay Livingston worked as a writer/director for CBS Television in Los Angeles, McCann Erickson in San Francisco, and Eastman Kodak in Rochester. His first novel, *The Prodigy*, was published by Coward, McCann & Geoghegan. His second novel, *The Synapse Function*, was published by Signet (NAL). His third novel, *The Dolphin Crucible*, is currently under submission.

Lauren Luk

Lauren Luk is currently in her last semester at Chico State, where she has been studying media arts and creative writing. She says, "I'm not sure what the future holds, but hope to continue writing in any way I can. I also have a turtle named Ralphy."

Bruce Matthes

Bruce Matthes is currently completing his MA thesis in English and working on his first novel. He is creating photo-illustrations of his surf travel to stimulate his writing.

Shaun McClusky

Shaun McClusky is a geology major and is working on a minor in creative writing. In his spare time, he enjoys making fun of bad, low-budget movies, and discussing the finer points of comic superheroes.

Renée Suzanne Muir

Renée Suzanne Muir is a 50-year-old local resident who enjoys looking at life through a view finder.

Tim Muir

Tim Muir is a writer of both fiction and non-fiction. He intends to complete a manuscript about Chico history, the tentative title beginning "From Cleveland to Wilson..."

Sarah Pape

Sarah Pape is an English graduate student, studying in both the language, literacy, and rhetoric pattern, and the creative writing pattern.

Jeremy Rich

Jeremy Rich grew up in the Chico area and graduated with a BA in English Education from Chico State. He then spent the next three years teaching English abroad in South Korea, Czech Republic, and Mexico. He's now back at Chico State, enrolled in the teaching credential program. He enjoys writing, reading, playing music, and sports.

Lynn H. Rich

Lynn H. Rich came to Chico via the National Student Exchange Program from North Carolina State University. She is a mother of two boys and works as a volunteer for hospice and as a reading helper in local schools. She says, "I love the camera, use it constantly with my kids, and have the shoeboxes of photos to prove it."

Kelly Smith

Kelly Smith is a third-year student at Chico State. She says she is “inspired by Billy Collins, my dad, Mack the horse, and several sidewalks where I wander. Sushi and sunsets make me happy, but there is nothing better than letting the world work itself onto the lines of a blank paper in front of me.”

Pamela Spoto

Pamela Spoto is a poet, stick artist, conga player, activist, teacher, and lover of all living things. She believes dropping bombs on any living beings or inanimate objects is insane. She has published poetry in numerous small presses nationwide, from *The Journal of Poetry Therapy* in Florida to the *People's Press* out of Monton, California. She lives on five acres of red earth, manzanita, and white oak with her Akita, Mambo.

Christine Vovakes

Christine Vovakes is a poet and freelance photojournalist who lives in Northern California. Her poems have been published in small journals. Her articles and photography have appeared in several publications, including the *Washington Post*, the *Sacramento Bee*, and the *Christian Science Monitor*.

Marianne Werner

Marianne Werner teaches English at Butte College. She received a master's degree in creative writing from Syracuse University years ago. She makes her home in Chico, and travel is her passion.

Celina A. Westphal

Celina A. Westphal has “played around” with picture-taking since she was in high school. She is a nurse at Enloe Medical Center; photography is one of her recreational outlets.

Tucker Zitlaw

Tucker Zitlaw says, “I am an eighth-grade homeschooler from Orland. I got a camera for my birthday and have been enjoying practicing with it.”

