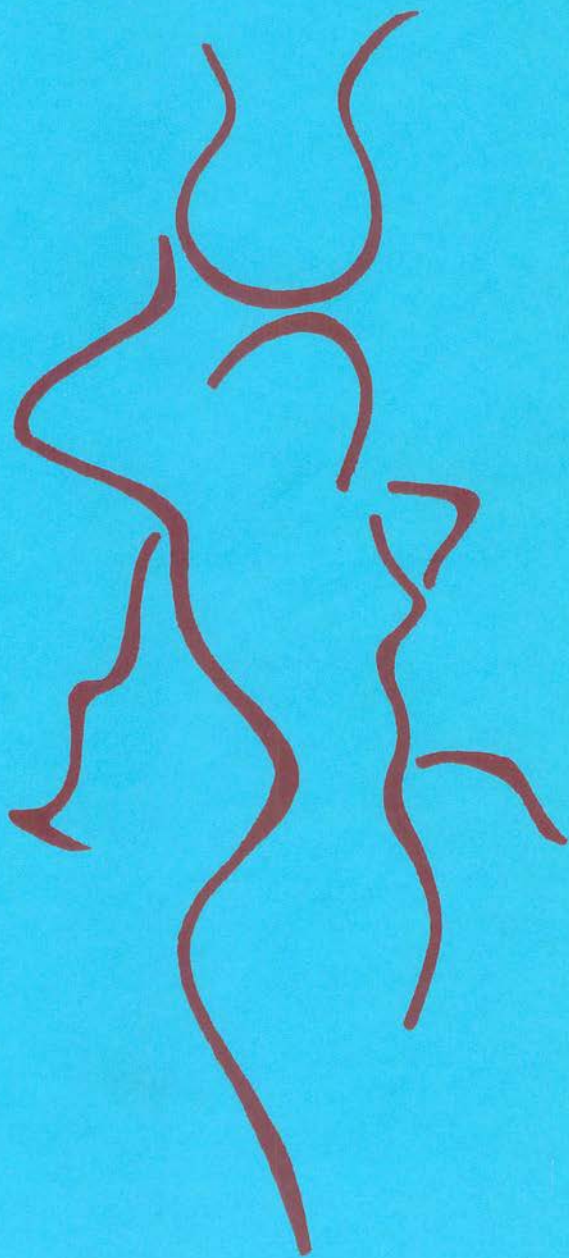
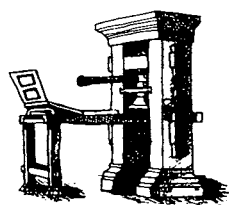


WATERSHED

CSUC's LITERARY MAGAZINE





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Introduction

In discussing his thoughts on poetry Czeslaw Milosz wrote “What will the poetry of the future be, which I think of but will never know?” The current *Watershed* staff considered this question and offers up this issue as a possible indication of things to come.

Like other *Watershed* staffs, we had a difficult time selecting the manuscripts we would publish. As staff members for the last issue, Craig and I were surprised at the high quality of work submitted. The manuscripts we received for this issue confirmed what we suspected then; Chico has a talented and prolific writing community. This quality of work makes the struggle of selecting manuscripts worthwhile.

We would like to express how important Ellen Walker is to this magazine. Without her knowledge, enthusiasm, guidance and wisdom this issue would not have happened. Also a special thank you to Gregg Berryman for his help with the cover. One last thank you to Lois Hicks who kept us up past our bed times by bringing coffee to our late night meetings.

Clifford Colby

Watershed

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WATERSHED

CSUC'S LITERARY MAGAZINE

Volume 9

Number 2

Valerie Allison

Bright Grief and the Night-Sky Benediction Factor

We tremble out of season
and take turns being overwhelmed.
Aware of Nazi-brain
damage, Kafka starving,
and the down pour, which was fine for walking.
I wanted to soften it
with a reason, but it
was almost Valentine's Day
and the portable war memorial
was a straight slab of reason
and the Aztecs had a reason
to rip out hearts to make the sun rise.
Now who sees the daily torn,
not abstract heart
crown the steal
and make sense rise in the mourning.

Erich and Kathy and I skipped school
to ride with Jon to the Indianapolis
psychiatrist. We ate White Castle hamburgers
with smothered onions. I cried
for the endless gray
mud beings, trampling the old gray mud road,
being trampled,
one mud tear
changing the structure of the face,
bringing part of the eye and cheek and me
with it,
no one stopping,
our gray matter.
Making sense.

Michael Odom

A tight crevice in the grass

The dark gathering sky, whipping rain,
a well-designed mailbox: A dry place,
a tower for ants, a palace
of letters, of tight rooms.
A field of tall weeds
and choking wheat, eating rust
from the dead tractor. A jack-rabbit
changing the traveled paths;
a tight crevice in the grass
is the new road. Old
barn, a few specks of dropping
paint on the grey wood. The grey house
turning black before the sky. Inside
it is more shadow.
Now the night, a decayed
old man, and the house, in a field
where no one went,
give up work. And so very little
has been done.

Anastasia Tarmann

Here Comes the Tide

Woa, I am on fire. Fiyre! Grow--ooooh up, up.
Here I go. How will I express this Zest?
It's feeling soul. Nothing stoneground.
Free, fly, flow.
Oo, oh, woa--
Doo-un-doo-doo-
Bop! Texas barbequed omelet. Oh boy. Funk is
In my jowels, my bowels, my--
Cow,
Ride the cows. Go ahead. Jump them . . .
Those boys (" . . . will be . . ."). Screw
the rocks, the trees, the sun. Yeah, yeah, yeah.
Feels great.
Funk begat funk, Jazz cradled the Rock.
Hold it tight. Squeeze for all you've got. Mustard,
Relish. Sticky, sweet and wry. Ha, ha,
hey. Grand master mouth. Open W I D E--
Here comes the tide.
. . . Roll, Baby . . .

But sometimes
now, without reason,
we both tremble
and pass under
need's beauty,
with the night sky still
smiling
into our lake,
which is fine for walking.

Felicia Ferrance

Alley Cat Parade

Backstreet home for bad girls,
an afternoon spent
What crime?
Cuffed and catted
sharp shove, calloused claw,
Twin officers hunker up
from nowhere.

I never knew it was obscene
to be seen,
fatigues, army green,
boyscout knapsack
on my back,
standing on the street corner.

Downtown, playground
for prostitution, runaways.
I'm fifteen,
where else would I wait for the bus?

Words fly like bullets
ricochet,
badge to button of bobs in blue.
Eyes wide of audience askew,
sidewalk scrabble
trip on cracks and stare,
the bums don't care.

Michael Bertsch

these three feathers in my fingers
only two I found; the third was
given to me: arthritic old woman
tottering in plaid skirt, red perfume,
center light points in grey eyes, "It's a flicker;
they're always droppin' these beauties."
meeting, we each plucked our feathers from the path:
— eye glimpsed myself, reaching down, in her eyes —
mine quail, hers flicker. Quivering
hand roped in blue-green veins: "You may
have this one, too." Notice orange
quills like sparks from night-wood fires.

Barbara L. Kimball

Chautauqua, Kansas

You lie there in the valley
among the blackjack trees
hiding your history
from the world.

One block away, on highway ninety-nine,
on the road to Huleh Lake,
cars slice the wind
and no one bothers to look inside.

They don't know how thick the moss grows
on the roots of the sycamore
there by the creek,
the one that washed my feet
one day when I cried.

Or how the lilacs,
lilacs everywhere
paint the evening with perfume.

Next month, the middle of April,
I'll meet you at the Springs,
close to the red bud trees.
You'll know me.
You'll remember my need.

I am part of you,
or you of me.
Or did we merge as one,
one day, with me not knowing.

Roxanne Lake

Fisher

He was hunched over the vise when I walked in. He concentrated on slipping a half hitch over the eye of the hook, snipping the thread and dabbing the knot with nail polish. Then he released the mayfly from the jaws of the vise and checked its proportions.

I interrupted.

"You Carson?"

"Yeah." He clamped another hook in the vise, wrapped the shank with tan thread and turned to reach for a pinch of dubbing material. After a pause, he rolled his eyes toward me without looking directly at me, like a reptile assessing an intruder.

"They told me in town how to get to the river by cutting back behind your place. Told me to ask you. . . . Already got directions, so I'll be on my way, if you don't mind."

"The gate's locked."

"I noticed."

Carson swiveled to face the vise again, pushing his thick glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"I got directions from a guy at the post office. Pulled into the place down the road by mistake and started walking up to the house when a damn pack of dogs chased me back to the jeep. Figured I took the wrong road. Everybody's mother's got a dog in this town."

"I don't." Carson anchored the wings of the fly.

"Must be nice, fishing when you want, making a living doing something you like."

"All we get up here is nigger fishermen."

"About the road . . ."

"The gate's locked." Again he turned, staring in my direction, watery eyes leering over the steel rims of his glasses.

"Name's Frank Noriega." I extended my right hand.

"That guy at the post office didn't tell you trout like to take a siesta this time of day?" He didn't offer to shake, and my right hand hid in my hip pocket. Being polite was difficult, but I found it even harder to walk out.

Then a movement behind the door attracted my attention. To the left of a bookshelf cluttered with flytiers' manuals and magazines, a makeshift shelf of cinder blocks and boards stacked three-high leaned slightly away from the wall. Wider than the top board, a twenty-gallon aquarium was empty except for a floor of fine gravel and a slithering fist of snakes.

"Rattlesnakes," he announced. "Born this morning. Born live."

Carson finally stood. He was probably over six feet tall, but he seemed shorter than I, thin and crooked like a malnourished vulture. His sinewy arms were as long as his bowed legs. Stubby whiskers showed gray in patches, but were mostly brown like his hair, which was thinning on top and long all around, hanging in stringy clumps like damp feathers.

He neared the tank slowly, then reached down to remove a towel that covered a second aquarium on the bottom shelf. Disturbing a huddled, sleeping mass, he selected a silver mouse. It squirmed in his grasp, its tail wriggling wildly like the tail a chameleon leaves behind.

Then Carson lifted the lid on the larger tank and released the mouse in the corner. The creature froze, mesmerized by the undulating layers. Moments later, the snake mother slid from beneath her offspring toward her prey. Again Carson turned toward me. That was when I noticed dogtags hanging outside the neck of his shirt.

"You were in Nam?" I gestured at his tags and pulled out my own.

"Affirmative," Carson nodded. "Bravo Company, second platoon, west of Chu Lai. You?"

"Recon patrol south of Hue." I held up my left hand so Carson could see that two middle fingers were missing.

For the first time, Carson looked me in the eye.

"I could use a break. I'll take you to the river. Give me a minute to get my gear and I'll meet you at the gate." Again he reached into the tank on the bottom shelf and chose another mouse, but this one did not move. "I tied this last week. I put it in the tank with the mice for a few days to absorb the odors; then I go fishing."

I'd missed seeing the rattler capture her rodent counterpart. I saw only the rear end of the silver mouse writhe, jerk, and then relax, before I walked out the door.

Just about the time I assembled my pole, Carson swung open the gate and turned toward the river. He moved quickly, while I stumbled along behind him, listening to fluttering shadows chatter and caw in the thick riparian growth. What sky I could see through the treetops was thunderous, but exposed roots and low vines kept most of my attention focused on the ground. About two-thirds of the way down the hillside,

Carson changed direction and led me down a narrow worn path that paralleled the river. Squeezing through a barbed wire fence, we walked for maybe fifteen more minutes when Carson suddenly stopped.

I looked around to see where the path continued and realized we were at its end. I looked where Carson looked and saw a cavernous maw about four feet high. Picking up a broken branch, Carson pitched it deep into the dark mouth. A rattler symphony warned us not to enter.

Then Carson knelt down and unzipped his vest. From a pouch pinned inside his undershirt, he pulled out a wad of bandages. Stuffing the rags in his vest, Carson showed me what he'd unwrapped, a battery-operated hand warmer attached with rubber bands to the second mouse, the mouse fly.

From another pocket, Carson took out a thermometer and held it close to the mouse with his gloved hand. We sat for a few minutes in silence before Carson nodded his head, detached the fly from the hand warmer, connected its wire leader to the swivel on his pole's line, and cast the mouse fly into the cave. Then he jerked the pole lightly and dragged the bait slowly back to himself, until something pulled the nose of the fishing pole to the ground. He continued to reel in slowly. I could hear a crescendo of rattling and knew Carson had caught what he'd come fishing for.

The snake wound behind the taut line, the mouse fly snug in its jaw. I took a few steps back when Carson went forward to grab his catch. Taking firm hold of the snake's head, he lay down his pole. With his free hand, he pried the mouse fly free. Allowing the snake to coil around his forearm, Carson stroked the reptile while he talked in low tones. Finally, he relaxed his hold on the rattler's head, unsheathed his hunting knife, and cut the snake's throat. Then he handed the snake to me.

Carson disappeared into the brush, returning a short time later with an armload of kindling and a few thicker stubs of wood. By now, light was growing dim. I imagined a mayfly hatch wildy tempting trout on the river that I could hear roaring below, but I kept silent, knowing that while we'd spoken hardly at all, Carson had some need of me. After the fire burned with certainty, he reclaimed the snake, skinned and cleaned it, then skewered thumb-length pieces on a green switch. We hunkered on the edge of the firelight, watching the meat sizzle. Carson's voice was as soothing as the flames. His slow, soft words grew from a whisper till they were barely but clearly audible.

"I free you from your serpent form. Go home. We are grateful for your time with us, Little Divinity. We send you home. May you find peace."

A gust of embers reached upward. Carson poked a piece of the smoked meat onto his knife and offered it to me. He ate the rest, then lit a cigarette and took a long draw. Shadows merged, and the birdsounds ceased except for an occasional twitter. Home to peace . . . home . . . home. I found myself repeating his words and staring at this man whose molten soul stirred embers in my own. Firelight painted his face, and I remembered other faces in seeming sleep. My curiosity grew brave.

"What're you praying for?"

"Gratitude."

"I don't understand."

"God is great, God is good, now we thank Him . . . you know, gratitude."

"But why fish for rattlers?"

"To keep my instincts alive. You have to exercise your senses if you expect them to work when you need them." Carson took another drag on the cigarette, then flicked the long butt into the fire and watched it burn before he elaborated. "When I feel myself getting too satisfied with life, I come here to spit in Death's face, to rekindle that burning in my gut that reminds me I'm alive. That I've survived." Carson began to rock back and forth as he talked.

"It was an evening like this. The same smell. This time of year, too. We'd been on patrol for hours, sloshing through muggy stretches of open ground headed for a VC nest when the tree line about eighty meters away exploded with mortar fire. Jimmy and I were in the lead. We heard cracks in the air around us, and when I turned to yell, a rocket blew Jimmy apart. I'd seen other friends get killed, but that instant caught me off guard. I felt sick, and for a second I forgot to be afraid for myself until another crack hit my right thigh and I fell to the ground. Then another bullet plowed through my chest. I couldn't even look back to see how hard my men were hit." Carson shivered and began sweating. When he spoke again, he seemed out of breath.

"We were in the fucking open! I heard Kovic's voice yelling for me to get outta there, Sarge, get outta there, but a round of mortar snuffed him out. Couple other men tried different times to drag me back to the platoon. The first man fell heavy on my legs. I still don't know who he was. Then Simpson ran like a spooked doe straight into the line of fire, threw me over his shoulder and hightailed it. Balls." Carson laughed and shook his head. "Crime of it, he went home on leave and drowned in a boating accident a week later."

He stopped rocking and exhaled slowly. I was sure he was watching me. I tried to look into his eyes, wondering if he could see into mine, but Carson's glasses reflected the flames. Couldn't I leave now? I had come to the Santiam to lose those shadows from the past, not to relive but to forget the damn war. Carson echoed my thoughts.

"After they shipped me home, I spent a lot of time trying to forget Nam. Fucking waste of time. Even tried being married for a while, until the dreams drove her away too. Waste of time to expect anyone to understand." He took off his glasses and squinted at me. "But you understand."

Carson waited for me to reply. Unwilling to bare old wounds, I looked down, but images from my own dark dreams projected their faces in the cinders of the dying fire. Piles of bodies rotting in open graves. Villages igniting like matchboxes. Napalm burning in the flesh of children. Yes. I understood. My memory was crowded with snapshots like these. I nodded in agreement. Yes, I needed to talk with Carson about that other world, about the horror few others realized because few others could. I reached to add more wood to the fire.

Hours later, moonlight was our sole luminous companion. We sat in easy silence, having exorcised our demons, when I felt something curl around my ankles. A rattlesnake. My breathing stopped. Carson—Carson—Carson—this is not how I planned to die. My eyes shifted down to size up my companion, then across at Carson. If he was awake, I couldn't tell.

Snake man open your beady eyes you slithering fool . . . hold on man you've lived through worse . . . damn snake's sleeping on my shoes . . . jesus mary and joseph . . . stay calm breath think breath deep breath . . . hush a bye don't you cry go to sleep little baby when you wake you will have all the pretty little horses dapples and lays down Cholon way all the pretty little . . . pretty little Dieu with the wide brown eyes smooth-skinned Dieu do you wonder why I never returned why I broke my promise I have not broken it in my heart my Dieu hold me in your arms and take me from this place . . . from this place with the fucking snake wrapped around my ankles . . . Leroy broke my right ankle in practice ruined my chances for a football scholarship . . . things would have been different . . . oh but they have been different I'm tired of different I want peace peace that's right no more late night slide-tape presentations of Dong Ha rice fields irrigated with blood . . . no more slumber parties on the Santiam either . . . I want to weed my memories compost my past I don't want to sleep with snakes all my life . . . I confess to almighty god to blessed mary the virgin mother to the holy apostles peter and paul and to all the saints . . .

I don't know how long it was before I fell asleep, but I was startled by soft raindrops early next morning. Immediately I imagined myself surrounded by cold-blooded guardians who waited to attack me at the first sign of dawn. When the rain began to muddy the ground where I lay, I hoped that rattlesnakes disliked the accommodations as much as I did. Standing up very slowly, I found myself alone. No snakes and no Carson either. I had a general idea of how to get back to my jeep, that didn't worry me, but where had Carson gone?

Looking around one more time before I walked up to the road, I saw a dark pile a few feet in front of the snake cave. it looked like Carson's clothes. I approached warily, finding it to be just that. Where was Carson? the light was too dim to discern his footprints. Where had he headed? Surely not into the cave. I decided to leave Carson's belongings where I found them and call the sheriff once I got back to the fly shop. But what would I tell him about this man who fished for snakes?

It took me twice as long to hike back uphill as it had taken us to descend into the valley. More time to think. I remembered a prayer I'd learned at catechism, and I repeated to myself as I climbed, "Though I have walked through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil . . ." As I neared the top of the path, I saw smoke billow from Carson's chimney.

He was hunched over the vice when I walked in.

Lyle N. Nachand

Too Early

Too early for a boy of twelve.
One shot, and the echo
spins me a circle.
Dumbfounded, dazed,
lips thin as wallpaper,
tissue faced,
I watch my father
sinking his silver blade
deep in the downed deer's gut.
One poorly measured moment
and all my notions of immortality,
shields of youth,
are reduced to a quivering jell.
In this sudden rush
reality hits me hammer hard,
breaking my steel-ribbed Superman
and soaking Santa's silver beard
a bloody velvet red.

Craig Gingrich-Philbrook

Blooms the Wool

Early in our Century, floods
washed a thousand sheep
underground. They did not suffer long. They did not
drown so much as leave their bodies
by agreement. This is what

I tell myself, planting simple-roses named, strangely,
for Christ. They are the white
of illustrated-Bible lambs. They gesture, each bloom
a breaking of hands. The laying on
of water, to soak

the new roots,
takes a long time. I finish a novel. I heal myself out
of the crisis, stare from the back window, where
a thousand sheep, not symbols for anything,
honest

to God, crest the hill, flowing in a wave. I imagine
them crushing the roses,
the spattered
blooms, the wool
knit with thorns. Just a little

blood, comparatively, is to have
saved us all. Such magic
inside naming. I look out the front
to the roses, then back
to the advancing sheep, the tidal panic

of the herd, the bellwether
bleating, breasted
on the electric fence, honest to God, each
cry like a beat
too much from the knuckle-white heart.

Craig Gingrich-Philbrook

Amelia

Who can refuse the list
of things which have lost their magic: the dulled fork,
the tarnished struts
of a lampshade? For example, lovers try, all the time
and fail. Once, sailing near a Grecian island
he said the corkscrew had slipped
into the sea. The fish
will not know how to use it. It is this disrepair
of which I speak, the rust
of implements forgotten in their sheaths. To misplace
is to abandon. Even rabbits' feet
go dead, left untouched, like flashlights, like infant
macaques in those psych-department studies
about the primacy of affection and the result
of its denial. Who can refuse the legality
that follows seven years
after a wife
vanishes at sea? Or the waves caress the undercliff
to breaking? The fish
will not know how to use her. The madness
of the fallen airplane, the soldiered uselessness
of immovable wings, the picture book
manta rays and how the text said
they almost flew. No
dividing the water
to look. No recovering the tablets lost on the mount
and crest. The litany of sins
begins with ever having had, in the first place,
a dream-girl.

Craig Gingrich-Philbrook

Walking Elizabeth Home

“You will do nothing but repeat the old,
old words, while you imagine you are
living.”

--Pirandello

1.

*We share the difference between chapels by Mark Rothko
and Matisse*, I wrote my lover, yesterday, not knowing which of us
dies with our colors, and which stands out bravely,
a cut-out on the wall.

It is hard to love a man so distant. Far away, a woman friend
Elizabeth and I attend meeting
with Quakers. A Rothko print
hangs in the library they borrow,
homeless for God.

I know I am it, that border
between black and gray, between gloves
and the hands that still weaken
inside them.

I know I am the silence, and wonder, can
Elizabeth hear me
trying to remember how his limbs shook
because we had not made love
for a while.

2.

By night, this snowfall, and the abandonment
of morning,
heaps up, the chorus in a round. She says,

*I saw a bumper sticker, "JESUS DIED
FOR YOUR SINS: MAKE IT WORTH
HIS WHILE."*

His *while*.
And if we could each
leave a church behind us, each

eat
the art we pray for

wouldn't the past sustain us
as we said the old, old words,

*This
is the snow;*

*This is my body
walking Elizabeth home.*

Craig Gingrich-Philbrook

The Point of Clarity
for Valerie

My hands are full of hair
from prickly pears—whisker spines from their pocked,
membrane-red, sore fullness, each
unique as breasts. And so I cannot hold

the comb straight, as I dress to meet her, as I
pull the curtains back and startle sparrows sitting
at the feeder. Oh, December—
when anything content is a delicacy. I've no more desire

to shock my palate. hard or soft,
the frost on the windows blurs the cul-de-sac, till visitors
appear full-formed at the door, though their gifts reach
the point of clarity

first. And all along I'd wanted only
a fire and some rum, two sprigs of mint
to run along my tongue, and one small gun that shot blue scarves
to represent

the little deaths that make up love but do not snuff
real things, like the gas flame underneath
the teapot. So I carve
my decorative fruit

until they resemble Christmas bells clapped
by walnuts or maraschino
cherries, two fruits that come apart in twos. Oh, lover,
where I lay down to cleave

my own wool clothes and come out clean. White as snow
I look out the window toward you. The drifts
reveal island trees. Everything
is under control: in deserts, cactus wait

to nurse the winter-waisted bees.

12/24/85

John Storm

diminuendo

something about a guitar softly strumming
sets the great glaciers within me
grinding towards the warmth
of leaf bestrewn coves
and waterfalls
of sleep
tonight
dreams
dissolve the
substance of realities
i no longer deem binding and so
freely i navigate the immaculate black
screen until sunlight persuades my eyelids to
open unto the fresh outline of heavy colors and objects

Sue Madonich

River's Rising In Her Eyes

Wind screamed across the lowlands, your chest tight
As she lay shivering beside you. The levee broke,
Forcing kids to cough on cold linoleum floors
Wrapped twice in rough wool blankets. Ready to flee,
Parents held doors open a feverish crack, smelling
For the silent death tunnel of water nearing. They gulped
Gritty coffee from thermoses steeped in brown run-off. She steamed
Your back door window, sure any floating object belly-up,
Was her pet lamb. Clutching you in bed, her big toe poked your leg
Through a hold in her shamrock socks. She wouldn't take them off
For the pair you offered. With her matted hair hanging
To her waist, you grabbed two handfuls like mangled river reeds
And pulled back her head to face you
When you made love. She didn't start crying
Until you did.

February 28, 1986

Daniel McColgin

On A Saturday Afternoon

I saw a black dog, mean and frothing, barking at pedestrians
on the sidewalk from the back of a pickup
I saw boys with dangling silver earrings standing on their hands
while riding skateboards on illegal sidewalks
I saw two lesbians, arm in arm, unshaved punks, walking
a pitbull with a scar on its right leg
I saw a crime being committed in the daylight—its victim
falling into accord with human nothingness
I saw a prostitute performing an abortion in a public restroom-
graffiti on the wall, hanger on the floor, fetus in the toilet.
I saw a tree that appeared to me an erection
a rose I mistook for a vagina
I saw a blind man with burnt eyes laughing
at the bleeding sun
I saw my reflection in a blood rushing gutter
my complexion was clear

With his white blue gallic eye, like mine,
young Arthur showed me a vision of madness
while drinking beer on a Saturday afternoon

I heard the child poet praise damnation while drowning
in waves of hallucinations
I heard a crow sing a sad song of tears, "Pain must be reinvented"
sorrow must not be forgotten
I heard Zarathustra laughing at God's funeral, while
balancing on a tightrope, high overhead
I heard a song of birth and life renewed this morning
I heard a song of bitterness in the early evening

I heard the saddest song of death and of life long lived
at midnight
I heard sweet laughter then
I heard the bell chime twelve when the fever had ended

I saw a blue car parked on a patio against the spring sky.
The owner had sacrificed boredom for the sake of satori. A fair
trade. The Dharma scriptures are the work of tranquil minds.
“Enlightenment and bliss shall be ours,” cried the sage. The
car got a ticket. The sage arrested for vagrancy. A banker was
late for work. Nobody cared.

Someone died just now. Somewhere.

Nancy Boyles

The Gregorian Monks Chant

No more songs about rain,
the tears on my face.
Damn the hem of her dress
and that empty-armed feeling.

I want to hear the Gregorian Monks chant
nature-laced tunes about a god
they can't see, only feel and hear
a love song from space,
a naked song running
through empty-armed grass
blade to blade
blade to blade
no shelter rock or tree.

The monks ride bareback on tunes—
they whistle
while throwing clay on the wheel,
they hum
floating through the rose garden
fingers hidden in long black wraps.

I want to hear the Gregorian Monks chant
I want to hear them rock
in hand-made chairs to a sonar pulse,
I want to ride on the hem of their skirts
through empty-armed rain
drop to drop
drop to drop
no shelter rock or tree.

Byron Fountain

Lowry's Consul

Not the blood of christ
but its clear opposite burning
in his head of visions. One life's fatal
incubi. A mescal dream within
a sugar-coated skull. Dogs
gather in *la hora de muerte*.
The wildest Gothic tympanum made
real one gargoyle with a gun.
Vomit his extreme unction.
The damed are happy in their ditches.
One life could not carry
you further from Cambridge.
Death has its own day here
and there are 400 swimming pools in hell.

Lawrence Mackin

The Purple Hearts

Dusk is when I kick back on the porch and lose myself in nonwork thoughts. In fact, dusk is when I become more than a language instructor on the county payroll. I become a creature of habit, a drifter, a beholder of what's out there, surrounding me: untilled fields, waiting for my gentle hands to make a difference and restore cleanliness. My distracted pupils are forgotten after two ales, and I click my heels together as if tapping along to a beat. The sun, that predictable blot, is disappearing again. Oh how I wish I were fond of this rented territory, this dusty terrain out of Zane Grey. . . . Oh how I wish I were maintenance-oriented. Tonight, my unwise habits have overtaken me. Tonight, I sit back and rock myself into a stupor. I count the piles of lumber, dead weeds, sheet metal, debris. My stupor cannot prevent me from making plans to overhaul the place, to make it livable and vital and even joyous. Rocking in my chair, clicking away to a nameless beat, I think of guest lists, dinner parties, gaiety.

Just as evening takes over, the phone rings. Ring after ungodly ring. I dart inside and caress the instrument. Belching, grabbing hold of myself, I answer with a question: What?

"Your father hasn't got a lot of time left."

A mechanical voice, like the time report. A recording? I swallow hard and scratch the tip of my nose.

"Who are you?"

"I'm his private nurse."

I have the chills. "I'll be there tomorrow morning."

I leave the phone hanging and connect to the darkness on the porch. The horizon is gone, the landscape is gone, and my plans are unfocused once more. I pound the walls and pack. Packing with a purpose.

Thirty thousand feet up, I listen to the emergency instructions and lean back in my seat, defying regulations, waiting for the end. I doze, I dream. A garden party. My father looks aristocratic in a golden flowing gown, up at a podium, overlooking ferns and cacti, snickering to himself, counting heads. He sends out warning signals. . . . He suggests barricades, protective devices, shields, armor, caution, suspicion. Nobody listens. My father shakes his head, picks up the podium, and throws it into the audience. And then his golden image disappears into a murky background. No takers, no followers.

We touch down and all is streamlined. Eighty-three and hazy in L.A. No focal points. But there are solid yellow arrows in the maze. The signs lead me to countless lines, in which I never waver. I cover my mouth when I yawn, and I refuse to stare, despite being bombarded by costumes: bards, dwarves, maidens, harlots, studs, starlets, religious fanatics, nuclear con men, tattooed sailors, marketing representatives. I count luggage, I think of white courtesy phones, I wallow in the motion.

Outside, the cabbies release their primal honks and wave here and there in frantic efforts to survive. They are waving to me, since I'm one of the luggage people. Horns, beckonings, small change. The sheer joy of feeling my suitcase again.

As if directing traffic, as if knowing what the hell I'm in for, I pick out a cabbie and flag him down. Making this selection is my way of taking control in L.A. I flash my thin wallet and insist on tossing my suitcase into the trunk. I tell him I'm not, repeat not, a tourist. His ruddy cheeks glisten like two mirrors. Where to? he says. I say The massive religious hospital, near downtown. Haze, coughs, smoke, darting travelers. His moon face: a complex geography of creases, lines with no arrows, scars, sores, unknown growths. The cabbie seems to blush, then he scowls: What for—you got some relative in that pit? He screeches out of the pick-up area; holding on to the bars that separate us, I explain that my father's been in the hospital, in a private studio, for a long, long time. . . . I explain that he's being eaten away by a cancer more powerful than the Pittsburgh Steelers. His frown gives me pleasure. Your father must be a very, very rich man, he says. I say: My father has plenty of coverage—insurance up the ass.

San Diego Freeway: an amusement park ride. Bumper cars. I smell diesel fuel and mint chewing tobacco. White arrows like fleecy clouds, like images on a screen. An auto wonderland.

Dozing and dreaming is out of the question. The cabbie flips a grimy photocopy back to me. Calculations, charts, graphs. He wears a mask: the articulate newsmen, quoting the percentage annual growth rate of normal beds in L.A. County hospitals over the past five years. He's a reporter, not a real cabbie, and he's full of facts. He says: You're not the first one I've driven to a hospital. . . . I think these figures are somthin' to behold. He swipes the photocopy out of my hands, crumples it up into the size of a golfball, and throws it out the window into the rest of the litter. He chants: Inhuman, Inhuman, Inhuman. His chants paralyze me.

How do I feel? An explanation: When one has insurance up the ass, one doesn't let a lot of things get to you.

He drops me off like an express package. We are silent, we are nodding, and we seem to be understanding each other. I swear, if I were more forthright, I'd slice my arm and force him to be my blood brother. I could use a blood brother in L.A. I offer a mock-salute. I give him a tip he'll never forget. Am I worshipping him?

The hospital: an inflated sugar cube, named after a saint named Joseph. It is a formidable structure; a natural disaster wouldn't have a chance against it. The cube, built to last, standing tall and alone, withstanding external pressures.

Cringing, wiping the foreign substances from my forehead, I think of clicking my heels on the porch. My chin is up. The front doors open with no effort on my part; I could be entering a supermarket. The reception area: walls covered with plaques, awards, glossy photos of executives or patrons; *Health & Diet* magazines littering the low tables; sofas bursting at the seams with children and their watchers; Biblical data sprinkled about judiciously. A morass of anticipation.

A rosy, wide-eyed woman looks up at me from behind a counter and says: You want to visit someone, right? I gaze beyond her, into the wall that resembles nothing; her smile is clean, and she must expect a precise response. She recites my name, says Cancer, says Demise, and emphasizes Private nurse. Clean smile: Of course, of course . . . your father's one of our favorite patients. A true model. A saint, ha ha. I have the chills again. I sign three forms without reading them. Rosy as ever, she directs me to the elevator and says: Lucky you. . . . The two of them've been expecting you.

The elevator is inept; it's trembling, as if hung over. The thing abhors the activity of rising, moving like a tugboat pulling an oceanliner,

craving sympathy. The eighth floor, my destination, is the second highest floor. In between the fifth and sixth floors, I seize my pen and grope for a tablet. In my haste, I've failed to come up with a list of questions for my father, a list like the ones I always created before our bimonthly phone conversations. Useful lists . . . calming influences. Lists for the classroom, definitely. But here at St. Joe's, I'm noteless, fumbling around, unsteady.

My fingers are trembling, so I stop at the water fountain on the sixth floor. I sit on a bench—should I make believe it's a park bench, and birds are chirping, and it's springtime in the city, and I've just fallen in love?—and I whisper poise, poise, poise, as if that very word will create the proper aura. I want to identify with—sympathize with?—other visitors who are taking advantage of their visiting rights. Visits, reunions, tact.

More water. I melt into the bench. My father and I haven't crossed paths in over a year . . . a brilliant windless autumn morning. Sunday morning, which for him meant TV shows with a heavy religious flavor. My father's moments to be pious. Ever since my mother's death, he's hovered around images of self-imprisonment, especially after long-term exposure to shrieking preachers. Every week, for almost three months, I received from him in the mail a set of crude pencil sketches depicting a man—a balding, bespectacled, round man like him—behind bars, shut away, giving this vaguely puzzled look outward, suggesting the beholder was below par, noncommittal. Since I refused to indulge him, I never critiqued these drawings on the phone. Instead, I imagined that over cognac in a smoky dark bar, we'd bounce judgments off each other like eloquent orators. So I kept a scrapbook for him. Eventually we'd flip through the pages of it together, smirking, nudging each other, pithy statements flowing, my father apple-red with embarrassment for even considering the self-imprisonment motif. At strategic times I'd refer to myself metaphorically—me the key, unlocking doors to crucial and enlightening self-insights.

That pious Sunday morning. My father, mumbling to himself, was spread out like a beached seal on the couch throughout my visit. Transfixed by the humming TV, he wanted no part of a conversation. Was my presence comforting? Did he think I was influenced by the symbolic reds and oranges exuding from the screen? Hell-fire all morning. Wide-eyed, frenzied evangelists possessing secret knowledge, shrieking into the camera, into my father, tugging on their hair,

shaking their clenched fists, and then exhorting the Heavens and chanting as if forlorn, or as if grief-stricken. What was the message? Were they showing us how little we had suffered, when you consider suffering—authentic suffering—on a world-wide basis? Another channel. A slide show: Graphic hyper-real depictions of starving babies, floods, atom bombs. Between vicious finger-pointing (my father winced) and striking matches (more hell-fire), a stately preacher from somewhere in Arkansas told us to put our heads in our hands (I retrieved a beer from the refrigerator; my father put his puffy head in his hands) and consider, while giving the ten-count, what bliss awaited us after death (his voice was a screeching tire). Right that very moment we had to start a program . . . a step-by-step program to reach the ideal of pure authentic suffering. One could not feign suffering. . . . One could never seek it consciously to be a genuine repentor.

That was all I could take.

Refusing one more for the road, I shook my father's icy soft hand and faded away, beer abstracted, sense-dulled, studying his misty eyes, groping to understand what was no more than random monosyllables flowing off the edge of his lips. As I walked down the thin concrete path to my car, I thought of the way a California abalone practices self-preservation, clinging to an ocean rock. The deceptive power. And I assessed my father's clinging ability, his couch in front of the TV acting as a shell, a magnetic shell where he'd be anonymous (one of the multitudes) and where sooner or later he'd be inspired enough to draw.

I walk backward into the elevator, wishing I were surrounded by other visitors, thereby forming a group. Up to the eighth floor I sway, mocking a ballroom dancer, sensing apprehension everywhere, wanting to be greeted by a familiar face, repeating to myself that memories at a moment like this are as piercing as thorns. Forget the past, you fool.

The doors open wide, and off to the left is a leaning white form in an official stance, a lurking figure no doubt carrying the news. Her amber hair reminds me of a waterfall. She breathes as if she's just finished a footrace. As poised as can be, I shake her outstretched hand as I hop—yes hop—out of the elevator. I assign the age of 39 to her because I want to deal with numbers.

Her rouge-caked cheeks are assaulting me; her eyes and lips are compressed as if mere slits. There are pungent lime like smells, so for the moment antiseptics are wiped out. Her taste in limes is a relief. Looking past me, flashing a pink healthy grin, she introduces herself as

Lucy the private nurse, refers to the striking resemblance between father and son, and says Follow me fella. A command. I am led down the deserted spotless corridor. Staying a good ten yards behind . . . my every step is feather light, unobtrusive. Studying her back, I wonder how someone in the nursing profession can be so horizontal. Her hips are 42 inches wide; she is 39 years old; my father is 66; we are on the 8th floor, heading for room number 812.

Lucy walks as if wading through trenches, sneaking up on an enemy. Afraid of losing her, focusing on her indigo ring, I fight off the fluorescent lights, watching her blend perfectly into the snow-covered landscape, the ski trail ahead. Memories as thorns, staying with the wavering ring, searching for words.

The journey ends. Lucy performs an about-face at my father's door, number 812. Her meaty hands clasp my soggy neck, and she pulls me oh-so-close to her with this statement: You know, your father's a real human being, a quality individual. I nod like a child on a playground; she releases me and I tell her: I knew that from the time I was old enough to make valid judgments of character. . . . I tell her: I knew as well as anyone because I consider myself more than just his son, his creation. A complex relationship, I say.

Lucy pinches my cheek, slowly shakes her head back and forth, and says the word Devout three times. Is she feigning solemnity? Then she says: Your father's one devout soul. . . . He just lays there, on his back, mumbling rosary-type words and phrases . . . and he'll gaze upwards like he knows **something** is up there, window-shopping or listening in or just plain residing. My father's private nurse pushes her dark wire-rimmed glasses back against her forehead. I can't see her eyes, but I know they're full of red criss crossing lines. She cups hands over her mouth to whisper: My boy, if he doesn't know what's up there, then I'll wager, wager mind you, that nobody does. I say Thank you as if saying goodbye, and we creep like a couple of goddam thieves into his private room.

Dark, windowless, damp. the contours of his bed are at the far end of the room. There is a black vertical mound beneath the quilt. I can't survive without tact.

I tiptoe to within touching distance of his feet. Squinting him into focus, scanning the room, I gaze at the vase of yellow flowers and hear nothing but my own pitiful breathing. The TV hangs down from the ceiling like a movie camera. . . . Lucy remains by the door, staring down at the thin streak of light entering from the corridor.

Then the bald patch sprouts like a turnip from the very top of the quilt. The blatant smells are all too familiar: alcoholic healing ointments, ammonia . . . Lucy's lime perfume is useless because this is modern urban medicine. My father's wiry arms. The streak of light is stabbing him in the chest. I blink like crazy. Where's the deep cleft in his chin? Where's the ruddiness? I stand with chin up at the edge of his bed, I inspect his arms, I ignore his soft wheezing, I am numb.

His arms. Arms used as instruments, with such force, to illustrate, to dramatize his nervous energy. His arms are mere hairless limbs, bony and pale, lying at his sides as if detached from his torso. Expecting those arms to leap out and grab me, I take one step backward, then glance over at Lucy; she's hypnotized, lost in the stillness. Without moving her eyes she says: A precaution . . . that's what I am . . . just in case something is needed, like a powerful sedative. She walks over to me, hands me a small piece of note paper folded in half, and retreats back to her position as door guardian. I open the note. Three calligraphic paragraphs:

Please, fella. Don't spend a lot of time staring. Talk to him. He knows you're here. I guarantee it. So by all means break the goddamn ice. Don't give him the mute treatment.

You've got to understand. I know your father better than you think. It's truly amazing what can happen in such a short period of time. I understand his needs, his innermost desires. So do something. For God's sake, communicate.

Please excuse the note. It's impersonal. But easier.

Still upright, at attention, I clench my oily fists over the note, putting my hands where they belong, in the back pockets. His arms. Arms with symphonic power, waving furiously, conducting, inspiring . . . now tubes: inanimate arms, like medicinal aids, attachments from Health Kits.

The rest of his head pops out like a jack-in-the-box. His cheekbones, once covered with pasta fat, are protruding, creating shadows throughout his lower face. His eyes are like two pink narrow lines, unblinking, tied to the ceiling, somewhere above the TV.

"Father," I say. "I'm here. Arrived safe and sound."

His gaze meeting mine. His bed is a landscape of shadows, valleys, pits, cut in half by the ominous streak of light. There is a sense of narrowness, as if we're not in a private room but in a subterranean cave, waiting for someone to build a fire.

"You look fine, son. Even in this sunset, son, you look just fine."

I take another step backward. My father looks at the ceiling again. Is he looking beyond the ceiling? Can he see anything at all? I don't want to know the condition of his eyes. Why the raspy, throaty voice?

"Thanks," I say. Then, "I'm, OK. But **you**. When are you getting out of this place?"

A smirk from him. And in one swift movement, he shoves his arms under the quilt to rummage around, as if searching all over his thighs for sores.

"Son, that question's irrelevant. What's relevant is that I had you timed . . . I had faith . . . I was certain you'd come visit me right around this time. So I devised a bit of entertainment for you." My father lifts his left arm out from beneath the quilt, and displays a small purple object. He extends his arm outward, toward me, as far as he can. "Do you remember this thing, son? Do you remember?"

"Of course I do. Your award. Your purple heart."

War stories. Memories are unavoidable. How many 4 A.M.'s, stumbling into the kitchen after serious ale swigging, did I find him still up, eager, distracted by old movies, silly reruns? War movies. World War II: my father's war. The front lines.

War stories. Groping to hear him, straining to concentrate on his moving sullen lips, his geographical allusions, his intricate dissections of strategy . . . while in a dazed drunken stupor. Those moss green eyes blazing in clouds of cigar smoke, his jabbing finger bursting through the haze, then slowly receding. How could he have been up so late? A minor miracle. Clutching my aching forehead, I sat next to him, watching bombs explode, nodding absently during his grim narratives. So-called heart-to-heart talks—all World War II oriented—to give me a real sense of fighting for your own skin. Yet his ultimate goal was for me to grasp the mystery of camaraderie. After opening a can of beer for me, he'd lower the TV volume. "My boy," he'd say, "you're late as hell, but I'll let it go this time. You're tired, I know. And I'm tired." He'd glance at the TV, take another sip of beer, another drawn out puff of his cigar, and then pierce me again with those green eyes, standing out like foglights. Leaning back and forth, repeating to myself: Don't pass out. . . . Be attentive, a soldier boy. He'd continue, "But, even though I may have done this before, I must emphasize again how thankful, how eternally grateful you should be for not, at your tender age, having to sleep in holes dug in the snow. Lousy holes surrounded by piles of dirty snow and stench and moaning comrades. Understand, son?" He'd pause, catch his breath, and was lost in the haze: only a shadow. "Just

remember this, my boy. . . . You've never had a chance to **prove** yourself, to wrestle with the force of courage. Christ. Courage is gone . . . never to return." What else could I do but shake his hand? Weaving down the black hallway to my bedroom, I could hear more bombs exploding and I felt lucky, lucky, lucky.

My father gently places the purple heart beside him on the bed, and he forces his twitching right arm out into the open. There are thick sheets of paper in his hand, held together by a single rubber band. Pressing the bundle against his face—removing the rubber band as if undressing a partner—he then scatters the sheets around the bed in front of him, forming a precise semicircle of heart-shaped drawings.

"You see these, son?" He points at each and every one. . . . His face is fastened to the pillow: cheekbones and shadows and pink slits. The top of his critical-patient gown conceals the fact of his weight loss . . . down to 108, according to Lucy. "C'mon, son. Zero in. What you're beholding here are vivid representations of my talent . . . my talent as a drawer, an artist. Understand?" I nod, I take a step forward, I examine each purple form in the middle of dozen white sheets. My father's soft wheezing is reassuring. "Just in case you haven't guessed, son, I'll fill you in. Each of these drawings is supposed to be a realistic depiction of the true blue purple heart, the one here at my side . . . the authentic one I'm going to give you as a reminder."

Now I'm leaning forward slightly, searching for a facial expression, searching in the corner of my eye for Lucy, his confidante. His face has turned into a field of gaping holes and scattered ditches; it is a battlefield. "Why, you ask? Well, son, because the real one means nothing to me. Nothing. Understand?" He coughs, then sneezes. I offer my hand. He rejects. "The real one is a farce. . . . The shattered leg and sounds of the bombs are still with me . . . with me in my heart and soul. Understand? The goddamn injury . . . it's responsible for my decay."

Saying I'm sorry. . . . Saying I don't understand.

Lucy turns up, scowling.

"Look, fool! **Look!**" He points at the sheets with all his fingers, moving them back and forth along the semicircle as if playing an invisible piano. "Can't you begin to see the sweat, the **effort?**" He pauses, sighs, clears his throat as if clearing a path. "Son, I have a final request."

Emphasizing it doesn't have to be final. . . . Emphasizing he knows I'll do anything . . . of course I'll do anything.

The holes and ditches can't conceal the smirk, a rebuff, his way of

turning the right side of the mouth upwards as if infusing the gesture with mythic resonance, suggesting what a fool I am. . . . After all, doesn't he possess the knowledge of what's final and what's not?

"All right, son. I want you to take these drawings home with you. Take them home and judge them. Judge them in terms of aesthetics. Then, when you feel you've judged them enough . . . when you've paid the strictest attention to every streak of purple and black . . . pick out the one . . . the **one**. . . that epitomizes my talent as an artist. Please. This is more than a request. . . . It's an outright command." His voice is a raspy whisper. Cupping his hands together like a sacred image, he lets his wiry form sink back against the pillow.

"What, sir, do you want me to do with the **one**?" His form disappears under the quilt. His chants are obscure, tribal, rhythmic. Lucy is chanting along with him as if commiserating. Death chants? Rejuvenation chants?

Then a muffled whisper. "Send it back to me . . . first class. I want to be buried with it."

He is waving his right arm back and forth as if surrendering. Lucy, Lucy, Lucy, he says. The private nurse rushes forth to be at his side. I'm right here, right here, she says. Lucy, he says, I want to sleep, Lucy. Please, my dear Lucy, please clear off the bed, organize everything, and show the boy out.

The grand descension. I'm alone, of course, and I feel encased in a see-through bubble the size of a standard hospital elevator, floating over anonymous farmlands in midwinter. The impeccable white floor is now exquisite squares of snow-covered corn fields. I can see a red-with-white-trim farmhouse and a family car—a blue station wagon—parked in front, its tires sunk in the snow. I toss the purple heart and the drawings into the far corner. . . . I kneel down to inspect: there, just beyond my left hand, are two children, both in yellow oversized raingear, laughing and chasing a huge dog. They're running in absurd circles. Of course! The kids are devoting this special time of the day to making themselves joyful and dizzy. Dizziness! Still on my knees, bending over now, I see my father, a monstrous man with arms like redwoods, dash out of the house, pick up both the kids, twirl them around as if performing a ballet, and pile them into the back seat of the family car. Off they go. To the circus? To the matinee? The ice cream parlor?

The car, now a blue dot, disappears into the horizon. I don't have time to figure out its destination.

As soon as I'm free and outside again, I click my heels together and become a drifter once more. I take deep breaths and scan the tidy and balanced homes across the street . . . silhouettes against the thick orange background. Dusk. The same cabbie beckons me with an open door. . . . I sprint over and hop in as if home again. Where to, pal? Back to the airport, I say. A good visit, pal? Beneficial, I say, very beneficial. He wonders what the hell I mean. Headlights, tiny white flickering bulbs, in every direction . . . straining to crush the hideous drone of traffic. I tell him I'm much more a part of my father's life than I realized. The cabbie, my pal, tells me I couldn't have realized this at a better time.

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

Valerie Allison is sorry but can't think of anything right now.

Michael Bertsch is a graduating Chico State senior who believes not only that change is the only constant but, like Hunter, that Paradise waits on the crest of a wave with angels and flames.

Nancy Boyles: The Gregorian Monks Chant is dedicated to the members of R.A.C.

Felicia Ferrance lives in Chico.

Byron Fountain is a graduate student in English. When he's not working as a tutor at Butte College, he leads a pastoral existence in Durham with his wife Janet and two children Cyrus and Allegra.

Barbara L. Kimball is now working on her M.A. in literature and creative writing. She loves to write, but has never considered herself a *writer*.

Lawrence Mackin is a published fiction writer; a former fiction editor of *California Quarterly* at U.C. Davis, where he received his M.A.; a long distance runner; and a senior technical editor in the heart of glorious Silicon Valley.

Sue Madonich lives in Chico.

Daniel McColgin started writing poetry at age nineteen and has been writing on and off for four years in a frantic and casual manner.

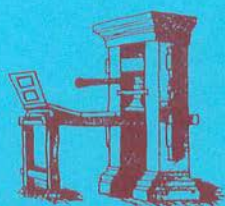
Lyle N. Nachand was born March 5th, 1950 in Arcata, California. After graduation from high school in 1968 he joined the U.S. Air Force and served for four years until discharged in 1973. After military discharge, he worked in a lumber mill for a short while and then accepted a job with the Trinity County Sheriff's Department where he served as a Deputy Sheriff until returning to school in 1981. From 1981 through 1983 he studied animal science at Lassen Community College in Susanville, California. In 1983 he moved to Chico and began attending Chico State. He has obtained his B.A. in English (creative writing) and is presently working toward a teaching credential.

Michael Odom offers this statement: "We describe individuals according to their occupation and Michael Odom is unoccupied, thus indescribable. He is also incapable of writing a cover letter and has thus thrust the responsibility upon an unwilling member of the student body."

Craig Gingrich-Philbrook lives and works in Chico, even though he knows that is only an expression.

John Storm lives and works in Chico.

Anastasia Tarmann was born in Arizona, moved to California. 5'2" and still growing . . .



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Michael Bertsch
Nancy Boyles
Felicia Ferrance
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