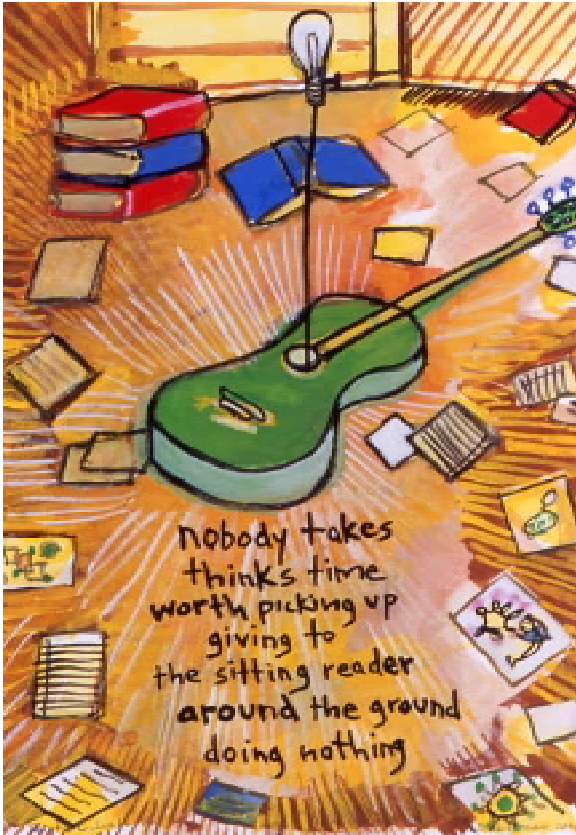


The 2River View

6.2 (Winter 2002)



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NEW POEMS BY

Thomas Bates, Roger Jones, Leigh Kirkland
Robert Hill Long, Frances Ruhlen McConnel
Michael Meyerhofer, Ann Politte, Logan Ryan Smith
T. L. Stokes, Kelley White, and Ian Randall Wilson

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Richard Long, Editor

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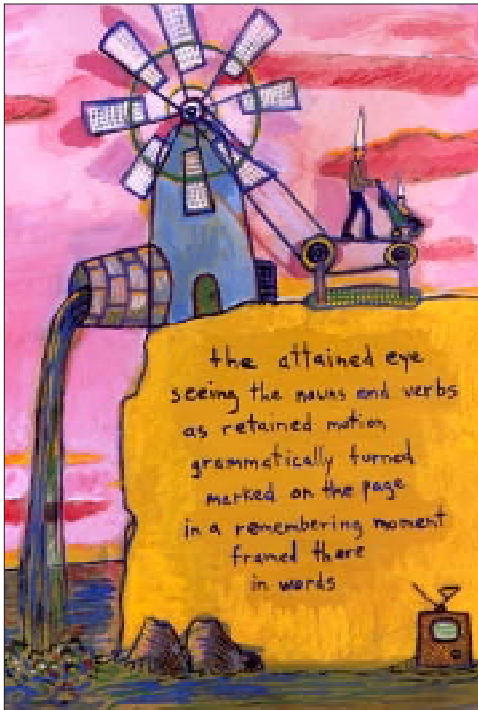
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How can you explain

poetry to Midwest town folk whose climax is steak and shrimp
at the Elk's on Friday night where you leave reeking of chainsmoke
and floorboards rotting from the tipped king of beer?

And how do you analyze data transformed to how many cardiac cath
last month and by whom on whom and how many ended up
bypass triple quadruple and how many died and some of them you knew
from the 4th of July parade sweating 300 pounds full military dress down
Main Street next to the AmVets float?

How many drowning this year in the local stretch of the Mississippi,
so young so old, with bee stings and beatings and tox screens
caught DUI late
late after the dance at the KC hall where the local band played decent
I can see clearly now?

Years of this and more then how do you handle your beautiful child
lying dead on
your bed after you're late reporting the final # of stillborns and
you're late
stopping for milk and finding her there, her last poem *so sorry*
so sorry so sorry?

After The Messiah Came And Went

There were no more horses to live by
heart pine barns my grandfather built
on the dead earth of East Colorado.
It was winter. Snowflakes fell and melted
on tongues of Gringo children like manna,
their mothers hollering breakfast from stone
buildings white with hoarfrost. Jim Cartwright
held the county seat, and nobody seemed
to know the difference. The air in our house
was sweet Wednesday mornings, hallelujah,
the weekly Bellevue Baptist praise meeting
come again to our kitchen with country hymns,
hash browns, hominy. My father kept tempo
with the fat Cuban heels of his cowboy boots
so you could feel it on the porch as you walked in,
throw up a quick hoot, Amen, and ask your pleasure.
This was the treasure none of them knew about:
the tobacco-black chitin of a horse fly
I kept hidden in an empty cigar tube I carried in my pocket,
the last of its kind. Its eyes were a strange lime,
and every time I looked I started to believe
my young body was only happening. I once showed it
to Bill Jenkins' boy, the one who drowned in Pawnee creek
last summer, said it was terrible dead, I don't remember.
I found him laid out on a low shelf in his daddy's barn,
naked, his skin was beautiful, I couldn't even tell,
his body in the hard shape of a cross so when I lifted
myself on top of him, arms outstretched, shins folded,
it was a double crucifixion. I remember how the thing was soft
and there were murmurs and I thought I heard God move
in the frictionless air. But it was the distant song of the morning crowd
lifted in prayer, pulled from a kitchen with down home
smells of poached eggs and pepper bacon, Jesus, Jesus
there was some other noise, a dull buzz
just beyond the boy's slow mouth, green eyes
full of death and singing. I am the last of my species.

Thomas Bates

Hymn For Heritage Days

This afternoon sings us with the indelible
mysteries of the mother tongue—tortillas, seared chiles—
and with the sacred syllables of local myths:
two ghosts haunt Poudre Canyon; water sprite
in Horsetooth, spirit of a drowned college girl;
Cheyenne spring water cures syphilis.

And here, just minutes west of Severance,
beyond the slaughter house and the low yellow barn
of the talking horse, the song extends itself
to ruder melodies of Ute drums and bad bluegrass,
the bold aroma of roasted corn.

A Mestizo boy pitches one, two balls and lands
his father square in the dunk tank, well worth
his mother's five dollars to satisfy an Oedipal urge,
splashes water so high it drizzles on the chile cart
where a whistling griddle tends the family business.

You know, somewhere on this great
Southwestern slab, from the summit of Long's Peak
to the bottom of the reservoir, the song
sinks into us like a sunburn or a lover, calling us
from the shades of superstition to a day
when we may forgive our fathers and step
from out these painted canopies into the sun.

Roger Jones

Flounder Fishing Near the Refineries

Fishing in the bay, just off the line
of oilrigs, we're close enough
to land to smell wet reeds, hear water
swish back and forth against the marsh,
yet close enough to the platforms
to hear the clang of steel, the putter
of engines pulling pure crude to the top.

Hardhats on break or loafing dawdle
and watch us, hang hands over the rail
and look down, daydreaming. Now and then
a copter buzzing the shore scares up
a pelican along the land. The waters
go swish, swish, gray-brown, sudsy,
a dirty froth riding small choppy caps

like heads on beer. The scent of oil's
in the air, clatter of industry, regular
chatter: someone's national hymn,
all metalwork and production. But what we
fish for flatten themselves along the slick
inlet bottom, look up, sometimes take hours
for bait we trawl before them like gold.

Roger Jones

In Hurricane Country

Sheets of hurricane rain
tangle in the air, howl against
the unboarded plate glass of our
sliding back doors. Palms bend
and blow, barometers bottom out.
Now comes the hour of tree-crack,
whoosh of shingles, bits
of the city mingling in the air.

How odd it is, a day later, the sky
cloudless, a grave stasis settled
on all, the cleanup underway:
chainsaws razzing, broken limbs
stacked at roadside, a local
grocer giving away half-melted
gallons of ice cream. At night,
both moon and power out,

we're home in dark too humid
for sleep. By the transistor radio,
we hear how the storm, still hungry,
slams like a drunk eastward,
up the coast. Here, in calm,
stifling dark, we lie flat on the floor
near the opened window,
gasp for breath like beached fish.

Reflections in A Polished Shield

A woman is saved from a dragon the knight swears is dangerous. For his kindness, the knight becomes a saint. For her politeness, the woman's reflection distorts on the curve of aluminum beer cans. The blibbering television does not stop the tongues of snakes flickering against her brain.

Because he rescued her, in spite, out of spite, he says, she grew the leathery wings of dragons, her skin scaly as vigilant snakes. *Don't tell*, he says. *Don't shed your skin where people might see.*

He wants the world chopped in pieces like the serpents he wants her to fear. If she isn't invisible, she paralyzes him with fear of the ground where he stands. He grabs her elbow in the kitchen, bends her back over the stove, turns himself into stone.

Outside his windowless walls, nights shine with sparks of liquid glass. On the precise surfaces of his road a crow pecks at a squirrel flattened on the double-painted center line. She has no answer for the things a man needs. The flow of her body is repulsive. Was it he who lit poisonous flames to curl in her skull?

What she feels I will feel. We pay homage through smiles revolting as the leaves of aromatic plants rotting. Certainly she understands how disgusting it is that she bleeds. How disgusting she is, the rotting of aromatic plants.

Men claim that touching us with their vision will turn a beholder into stone. We can look at them, we cannot touch them. Touching other women does not turn me to stone.

Maybe I see you as you are. Maybe he is stone.
He named those hard surfaces beautiful.
We do not turn each other into stone.

He gave us the same shape to be buried under the cold weight of flickering artificial lights.
I don't remember it that way. I have seen lightning flashing over a woman's body, skin moisture turning to steam, blasting clothes and shoes to leave her naked before thunder ever strikes.

Walking with Thoreau

It must have been hard for him,
to walk in the woods with Emerson, who looked slightly
to one side of the trees and birds radiant before him
to make out an essence more glimmering.
Emerson was amused that Thoreau would draw his diary
out of a breast pocket and read the names
the plants that should bloom each day
whereof he kept account as a banker when his notes fall due:
*Dwarf raspberry today,
Lady's slipper not till tomorrow.*

But Emerson was disappointed when on
the finest day, high noon of the year, (joyfully warm
but at night, coldish again)
the two of them rode in a wagon to Perez Blood's auction
the sweet gale
had already shed its pollen,
the lowest flowers effete.

After Thoreau died Emerson found his friend luminous before him.
The light had changed direction.
No longer a mirror reflecting his imperfections,
Thoreau became a window.
Emerson could finally accept
the strong legs—
wading into Sawmill Brook in stout shoes and strong grey trousers,
to examine Buckbean, concluding it had been out five days—
as an abstraction,
not recognizing himself the sufficiency
of a single patch of spotted wintergreen.

He warned Thoreau against looking too closely for the bird
that for twelve years he had seen only as it dived into a tree or bush,
lest life should have nothing more to show:
his own fear that the world was less than it might be
countered Thoreau's determination—
as he carried a music-book under his arm
to press yellow violets,
a microscope to count stamens,
a telescope for spotting birds,
his diary, jackknife, and twine;
expecting to breast shrub-oaks and smilax,
to climb for a hawk's nest—
that the world was all it needed to be.
Emerson recognized only the redstart,
and the rose-breasted grosbeak by chance.

One Sunday Thoreau had walked with Emerson along the Assabet,
the air full of the *Ephemera*,
the manna of the fishes,
falling like a snowstorm one day in the year,
only on this river.

High up in the air they could both see
the shad-fly, the true angler's fly,
blundering down to the river.
The fish eat themselves to death when it comes,
die of repletion: the kingfishers wait.

Thoreau said, *What you seek in vain for half your life,
one day you come full upon—all the family at dinner.
You seek him like a dream,
and as soon as you find him,
you become his prey.*

45 North

At 45 degrees latitude, the dead devolve
in record rains: a hundred inches this year,
rains deep enough to drink me, if they want.
This year graveyards are awash, they're sinking.

When I was nine, I shivered in a winter treehouse
with a friend whose great-uncle had just croaked
raving, drooling, the works. It rained while we talked
bravado about idiot age, and swore to never die old:

"If I live past sixty-four," I said, "I'll shoot myself."
I had lifted Dad's .45 Colt down from his closet,
cradled it, heavier than a baby as far as I knew,
and unswaddled it from its gun-oiled T-shirt.

1:30 a.m. I sit on the back deck pierced by leafless
oaks that shiver, like I shiver in the rain winds
of my middle-age passage. Slave to what, bound
to whose profit? I'm smoking to summon my father

and his brothers to answer for me. Smoke brings the dead
nearer in the rain; like prisoners, they tap code
on deck-roofing adorned for Sukkot with branches
fallen from oaks and firs. *Idiot age*, they're telling me,

that's what browns the oak leaves, what withers them.
But suicides are thrown torn green branches to sweep hell.
Father, the smoke of you blows out my mouth
to the corner of the house, sucked around its floodlit edge.

Smoke is all Uncle Ben managed to make himself
at sixty-one; Uncle Tommy at sixty-two. What did I want
at nine from the smoke-colored metal in my hands?
To sit on a wet chair and freeze, rain answers, on the deck

of rain's night vessel going nowhere. On slave ships,
sometimes, a hobbled necklace of men would wake
and see it was never going to be over, this capture,
not with the end of a mere ocean, and they would walk

off the ship, a spiraling molecule, singing as they chose
unsounded depths. Some had to be fathers and sons,
ending the shackles together. Father, shackled by rain
to your brothers, why does no one get out simply

by imagining a death he deserves? I flick the barrel
of the cigarette away. My black dog peers through
the storm door, anxious. Remember that painting
of the black dog swimming hard, swimming faithfully

toward something Goya kept outside the frame?
Father, you should know now: show me
the other side of the rain. *You're slave to nothing
but a boy's fear*, the rain taps. *Slave-boy, depression's dog*,

*what are you in middle-aged night, this far north,
this far west? In imagination you want to leap—
why keep your animal head above water?* Because
I want to sing how unjust it is that we're chained

together, father and son, in death's immortal mistake.
Is that reason enough? The rain won't say. I'm the age
of my latitude, I'm freezing. A hand like my father's
opens the storm door again, and the black dog

guides me through all the blinded rooms to bed.

Where Deliverance Comes From

I will lift up my eyes to the oaks where a thousand starlings bitch and jubilate and connive. And down to the boulevard fragrant with two-ton metal predators. Racing each other's dioxide stink. Digesting each human in their idiot stomachs. And I will say: Why me?

Why again? As though the oaks would lean down and hand me the answer etched in tannic acid. As though the ground should raise its grass dress to show me what I'm made of. So I will be grateful for being a witness: a pile of dirt with eyes. A stunned blink.

And a mouth, such a mouth. Lips that once were fat kiss-pillows, now thinning, hardening. Throat that was full of the hum and lull and wail of Hendrix now dry with gloat and derision. A faucet whose water is red with rust. Why shouldn't I want to look away?

The world waits for us with its maw open. We flee in herds, armored against it, along boulevards. And from what? Back where we switched on the escape ignition there's a yard where a girl makes a dandelion tiara. Where a boy lies down and sings to ants.

Everywhere we go abandons them. And drives us faster toward the mouth that will shell, crack, and swallow us in heart-sized morsels. Look past the singing oaks and shaved hills. That huge yellow mane, see? Those long yellow teeth.

No choice, then, but to shrug, and go, and try to sing. Like the starlings, happy that it's grown overcast. No choice but to stand it until you're plucked and bitten. Like this mushroom, *Agaricus campestris*, I lean down to pluck, to bite. Is that a maggot in the pink gills?

It falls in my palm—helpless as me before the size of the sun—a squirm, half question, half exclamation. How to atone for nearly eating what was not eating you? The mushroom is full of tunnels. I aim the small white life into one. And lay the mushroom on the ground.

Frances Ruhlen McConnel

Reburial in Springtime

Where I live now, where I find my desert home,
near cliffs of decomposing granite, in landslide country,

where prickly pear forms its unlikely fruit, its clusters of bruised thumbs,
along gullies and dry washes, the same flowers

of our old Arctic spring—lupine, poppy, and Indian paintbrush—
flare up blue and golden and red along the stark slopes.

Mother, your death sewed up my young life, sealed me in dread,
and my heart was a pincushion, hugging its sparkles of pain.

Today, clouds rally with the soft whir of a planet
passing its aphelion, coming back to us, back to where we were.

When rain licks the snow of Mount Baldy,
gathering into its flow what is dazzling crystal,

I recall the locker—those gray cubicles of frost—
that you lay in all winter, like meat in cold storage,

until spring yawned its black and ravenous mouth,
opening like space opens, once and forever,

and swallowed a whole constellation, the star cluster, Deb Ruhlen,
whose atoms went careening, skipping from their orbit,

to spring up in the breath of lupine;
we are still breathing you now.

In August Heat

He leans over the bunk railing to say
if she tells he will hate her forever.
Over her head, his weight sags down the springs.
It is hot already. Outside, Father rustles
through bean rows. Is it beans he is plucking
or just crab grass? She loves gathering,
but loathes chopping weeds, as do they all,
his rebel band, who, in spite of himself,
have their own tastes and beliefs,
their own bravado laws. Still, he will be in soon
to shake them from their damp sheets.

The air buzzes with the smell of bacon.
Their mother will be barefoot in the kitchen,
boyishly thin in shorts and bandana halter,
the caps of her shoulders freckled and peeling.
No one else is like her, who loves them no matter what—
so that you must protect her from *what*.

Of course, the girl would not run to their mother.
Yet she can not relent, though she misses already
those weeks of the boy's wheedling attention.
But her white hips at the last moment pulled back
from his whiter face. He screamed that she'd tricked him.
But there was only the fear even young girls learn to embrace
like a shining hero. Though, once in an alley,

he stood between her and a flat-eared,
hissing tomcat. Then, he was five.
Now the soft mass of his curls wrenches
as he leans, almost in supplication,
over the rail above her, but all she sees
in his eyes is a brutal and banishing light.

Or is it only a reflection of what she feels well up
inside? Brutal because turning against him
is turning against herself, herself loved,
no matter how or why. This act will divide her,
as she will divide herself over and over,
rejecting lovers or being rejected, and she
will never know for certain which is which.

She'd rather reach up and tug that sleepy
lock of his hair, and say, all right, love me
instead. And maybe he'd play along,
tapping lightly with his finger on her nose.
But how swiftly and gracefully he can give
Indian burns! She will never again threaten
to tell, though there are other ways of betrayal—
such as offering yourself when you're not
free to be offered, or offering yourself
to someone not your own. I don't mean she sees
all this from the bottom bunk with the smell
of his bed-things enveloping her.
She sees only a blur of what hasn't happened,
yet, but she feels the jolt of her own heartbeat
and a bitterness in her mouth,
that in raising a bluff he dare not call,
she must offer the daggers
they will look for in each other's eyes.

He is the first lover she will hold
tenderly in absentia, the first ache
where love is more loss than promise,
as she steels herself down to her deepest
muscle, refusing to take back the threat.
Though, outside, crickets and katydids
are singing and the fields burn
with the rapturous smell of wild grain.

Michael Meyerhofer

My Mother's Darkness

I wonder sometimes if she saw it coming,
my mother who
while living in Davenport

with my father, interrupted one night
their routine
of walking through the park

and couldn't say why, only that she knew
there was something bad in the trees
and the next day,

some girl's body found, cut up and raped.
My mother, who always knew.
My mother, whose last statement

to me or anyone else

was a small, simple thank you
for walking her upstairs
and switching on the light.

Michael Meyerhofer

Searching for God's Vagina

Thinking that souls must be shaped
like hands, I have gone looking for yours,
the way it was
and though it hurts you,

you have called me in, swallowing me
inch by inch

until I have reached
the curtain between oceans

and in trying to push through,
I have always felt you there
on the other side, pushing back.

And in Short, I Was Afraid

1.

How it comes so quickly
hands like curtains hands like sheets
hands that move invisible against the dark
how it comes so quickly

2.

I'll talk to the moon some nights
nights of breaking teeth
nights of open palms
the moon with eyes that have seen it all
and ask how it goes on looking
I'll ask
who is dying tonight

3.

A bird landed in my yard today
blue jay that scares the cats
it picked at the green grass the dirt
with its beak picking out worms
one by one
meticulous
thoughtless
this happens everyday

4.

When you and I said forever
when you and I said
together
forever
I almost believed it

5.

Don't ask me to go through that door
I'm afraid
nothing
is waiting for me

6.

The eternal footman
snickering

7.

Without answers
you see
no one ever comes back

8.

I am not adam
and you no eve

this happens every day

how it comes so quickly

we shall descend into the valley anyway
no one telling us what awaits

Logan Ryan Smith

At Attention

the shattering of the wine glass
brought everyone into an uproar
that you couldn't understand
standing over the shards and stain

Don't Hide Your Face When the Moon Cries

1.

The fox sings of dying,
and all the ears in the wood become silent,
uneasy. Wild things remembering how frail life is,
how close one step might take them.

If you suspect trauma,
always check the fingernails.
She whittled at her own, chewed away the evidence,
like the fox chews off his own foot in the trap.

She gnawed at the inside of her mouth,
picked at the invisible itch
on her sheer skin,
as if all the scars would be hidden.

And, if you asked her,
is everything alright?
She would always answer,
yes, I'm fine.

As the moon cried, she sat for hours
under the bat song, scraped with the nubs
of her little fingers, trying to bury
the resurfacing heads of secrets,

trying to sew the foot
back onto the fox's leg.

2.

Now,
she pulls up a corner of the curtain
on the windowless night,
where all the expired stars
are stitched into the carpet of her mind;

the fox sleeps with her,
pawless yet alive.

Ivory Remnants under the Owl's Eyes

1.

No bone is plucked without payment,
each comes with history,
marrow hard or hollow,
whether you like it or not.

I keep my bones in a red lid shoe box
close to the fraying hem of ghost dust
under the plank's coil belly,
where they never rattle

until my web fingers stir them.

Like crystal figures I carry them,
like artifacts under glass in long mute hallways—
and stand at the fore of sixty eyes,
museum lamps.

All the owls watch, pulling up and down
their shades, I lift a deer jaw
with teeth, shark's crescent rib,
one bird skull, papyrus-light.

Then scallops of unhinged vertebrae,
clicking, and a tooth
the elk hid in the mountain.

2.

The spike antler was chiseled off
over two full days of my becoming
an Indian, earning by sweat the soft, smooth curve,
the weight of the yearling's growth.

We worked in tandem, my friend and I,
with shoulders nudged
and tongues between teeth,
drunk morticians,

scavengers
throwing back our black wings.

3.

Drowned wide eyes watch me,
mermaid hair fanning his death mask.
Finally, into small web hands, he offers to shed
one point from his unfledged crown.

Hard Rain

Climbing into the car for school
my daughter says—*don't*
the raindrops seem harder
than usual—Well maybe there's
a bit of freezing—I am always
obliged to answer them,
even lame answers when
I haven't a clue.
I drop them off.
Go to the office
and it is a hard rain,
not ice though,
glass,
silvered glass drops,
knives,
shards of mirror;
they pile at my ankles and collect
around my shoes.
I kick at them,
send bits and pieces of my toes spinning.
My hands are bleeding
thin pink blood.
I throw the seepage from my hands,
a thousand tinsel streamers
like the clown buckets at the circus,
teeth,
bones,
laugh;
where is the light?

It was perhaps thirty-five years ago

the summer the scarlet tanagers came
out of the woods to die. I had glimpsed one
once or twice in deep woods but now saw glow
that sad bright red, paint splattered blacktop, pain
everywhere, feathers pressed and waving slowly
from hot tar. I do not know what caused it,
the exodus, perhaps a disturbance
in weather, a destruction of forest,
a change in the food supply, and they'd rest
their bodies in the sun to die; but what death,
beauty, and what more beauty beyond the reach
of our slow and limited creature sight
waits until our vision be stunned into light?

Cipher

—*Afer David Citino*

Because our fathers couldn't read or write silently
children were ordered to read to themselves.
You must keep to yourself, my father told me
as we drove out from Saginaw Harbor toward the other ocean.
His words sounded nothing like Bolingbrook, Arcadia,
Funk's Grove, Eureka then Stanton,
Gray Summit, Groom, Tucumcari—
all the towns on Route 66 that led us
west to a new beginning.

My father spent his nights
in a room he called his study
with not even the voices of a radio
to push back the burr of cicadas in the trees.
He must have heard someone speaking to him
in that small place
though he left it to me
to find a language common to the boys
of Our Lady of the Cross.
What the eye sees the heart can only endure,
there is no escaping Original Sin.
This lesson was rapped across my knuckles each week.
Still the game cat kills because it is hungry.
It needs no book to translate
the spring of its claw into action.

I spent my afternoons washing plates
earned a few dollars and waited
for someone to explain me to me.
The other staff had their versions
of how men take women,
of the proper way to bet.
These stories stood in for knowledge.
My father's door stay closed.
After work, I passed many nights watching
sidewalks, the people going
somewhere, anywhere, not here.

Ian Randall Wilson

Life on the Alley

—*For D. L. S.*

Oh the glory of closed shutters
and speakers that block all noise.
The cats are pacing.
Someone has parked beneath the window
filling the room
with the sweet vapor of exhaust.

Meats don't last in this apartment.
Lettuce sweats.
Brown rice takes longer to cook
as if at altitude.
I've emptied out the crawl space
though the ants are back
in a column from the sugar to the door.
They move with the ceaseless motion of a heart.
They exhaust me.

I turn on the fan and watch its white spin.
I promise I'll find a way
to bring you to my hands
where you'll encounter
a space heater of good will.
We'll have that much
of a life together,
and no hard bread.

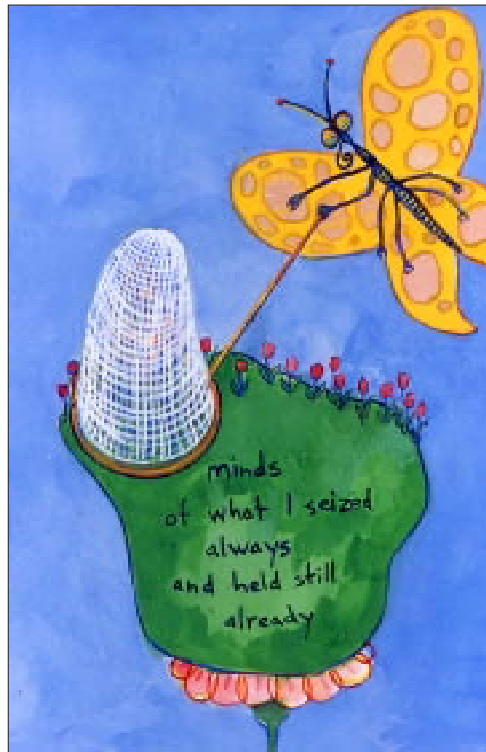
About

Thomas Bates is an independent researcher and writer in Northern Colorado. His interests include nontraditional approaches to education, common sense as a depletable natural resource, and cooking.

Roger Jones teaches in the MFA writing program at Southwest Texas State University. He has published one full collection, *Strata*, and has recently been nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Leigh Kirkland is a Marion L. Brittain Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Literature, Communication, and Culture at Georgia Tech. Her poems have appeared in *Raritan* and *Poetry Midwest*, with others forthcoming in *Valparaiso* and *Borderlands*.

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