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Habitats

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THESIS APPROVAL

The abstract and thesis of Sydney Jean Thompson for the Master of Arts in English were presented May 1, 1997, and accepted by the thesis committee and the department.

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ABSTRACT

An abstract of the thesis of Sydney Jean Thompson for the Master of Arts in English presented May 1, 1997.

Title: Habitats

A collection of original poetry exploring the theme of landscape as metaphor for human experience. The collection explores the regions of Oregon in three sections entitled, "Pacific," "Skeleton Caves," and "Cascades." Landscape is interwoven with human emotion and personal experiences. Nature becomes an objective participant and teacher in the struggle to understand the nature of grief, loss, love, and life.

The poems included in "Pacific" primarily pertain to relationships. The primary image is water, whereas the the poems in "Cascades" are mountainous, relating to trial, the possibility of volcanic activity, and the promise of unseen vistas. "Skeleton Caves" is named after the underground caves of Eastern Oregon. These poems address the darker side of the human condition and explore themes of physical and spiritual mortality.

HABITATS

by
SYDNEY JEAN THOMPSON

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS
in
ENGLISH

Portland State University
1997

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PACIFIC

Sunset

She begins the slow sink
 into him, closes
 her eyes to gravity,

 to waves,
 the pull
 of the inevitable.

Water reflects
 long glances,
 sounds fall away,
 kisses exchanged

in a coat room
 at party's end—
 two guests caught
 in tide's slow pulse.

Ribbons of orange,

 red
 unravel
 like loosened clothing—
 both deny

the possibility
 of intrusion

as heat dips
 into kelp beds, slips
 into cool—

each lost in currents,

 in light
 from doors
 unexpectedly opened.

Elm

She studies the trees
 outside the window—
 Through open blinds,
 light covers her
 in pre-dawn blue—

pieces of him
 fall

around her—
 fragments and angles
 flung in sleep—
 her body tender
 after the first night.

Arctic walls
 leveled in dreams,
 disappear, vanish
 into the floor, seep
 into veins of polished
 oak, held there—

ancient and dead.

Her lips touch a newly
 fallen hand, she feels
 limbs stir—disturbed
 by a slight wind—

within a lattice
 of veins, she detects
 a pulse—

within her,
 emotions thrash

like leaves in a storm—

3

each indistinguishable
from another—

a fury of green.

She slides the window
open, smells new wet
of rain,

draws up a knee—

sheets buckle and crack
under young strength
of hungry roots.

Orbit

She studies stillness
of inner skies,
seeks images
in constellations—

convinced there was
an explosion—

her soul, a single sun
scattered in thousands
of untouchable lights.

Beneath ribs, she feels
the angry fist
of a red dwarf,

and deep within,
something dark
pulls, swallows
planets whole—

grief's gravity—

each loss, each memory
slips down liquid black—
she senses the silent choke
of a star, the gasp
of meteors as they fall
to the other side—

unreachable.

Galaxies look away,
resume expansion—
she closes her eyes
to the swell,

ignores the shift
of bodies

5

as some seek escape,
belonging,

for each other
in the drift.

Glass

She lays down,
her skin

sand,

waits for the ocean
to drape tired fingers
across her back,

sift through stones—

they spin under touch,
edges worn smooth—

everything diminished.

Agates uncover themselves,
while others bury

deep

into rib—
small grains
closing their eyes
to bits of sand-dollar,
abalone,

to light.

She craves promises
of storms, the possibility
of dislodging—

sea fists bruise skin,
scratch deep—
waves retreat shamefully,
the taste of salt

heavy

in her mouth.

7

Beneath, she feels
the jagged bones
of a wrecked ship—

she breathes it into her
like something waiting
to be born

as tides
rise and fall
with no apologies.

Boxing

She craves moisture
and does not relax
until rivers form,
torrents created
by sudden storms,
waves she pounds
out of her body
as the gym ebbs
in ribbons of heat—

currents rush empty ravines,
every plant, every thought
swept away—
beat and breath dissolve
granite noise into sand—

the click of jump ropes
become crickets—

the soft pump
of gloves on leather,
leather on flesh—
the shuffle of feet—
 all echoes
of some distant sea.

*Last night, she listened
for evidence of water,
tried to provoke tears
with wine and Holiday,
wanting to lick night drops
off petals,*

*needing to tap deep
into the well found
beneath ribs—*

*a place the deepest
breath can not reach.
One molten tear—
her only reward.*

She leans into the ropes,
skin slick and wet—
tastes salt—

bad water
unable to quench
the thirst of fragile roots
and those who fall
on their bellies
to drink.

Swim

At twelve years old, she lies
face down on the dock.
Her head hangs over the edge—
the ends of her hair dip beneath
the surface, slip into
green.

She presses her body against
sun-warmed boards
while a corkscrew willow
whispers overhead.

Underneath,
she hears the gentle lapping
of nearly invisible waves made
by a pond's simple breathing.

Creatures mill and surface,
each drop alive
and swimming. Her hands
like cumbersome water-skippers,
skim her reflection,
that unravels and knits
back together again
until

her fingers part the water,
and her hand disappears
into its warmth.
Eyes closed, she imagines
the curious, small mouths
of bluegills,

and reaches further, winds hair-like
algae,

green and soft,
 around the curves
of her fingers, caresses
warm mud. Bubbles
rise to the surface
as the pond releases breath
she can carry
in a hand.

drift

midnight hands seek
the soft valley
between hip and rib—

a ravine worn smooth
by fresh water
seeking sea—

she folds into him,
stirs with each wave,
 each breath
brushing tender grasses,

feels gentle pulls
as clothes slip away
like beds of kelp,

some fragments swept under
while others expose themselves
in smooth indigo, white—

a whole sand-dollar,
a treasure, held
in careful hands

as the tide begins
its gentle climb
and the sea enters
 from behind,

distance measured
in soft bubbled lines,
salty debris left
 in wake,

tasted in the air,
on skin—

13

waves retreat
yet touch remains
as shore and sea

rest against each other
lost

in the sweetness and shine
of moon's eternal promise.

SKELETON CAVES

Hollow

She looks up and suddenly
it's winter—

the ponderosa fooled her
with furs of green—
January given
away by a lowered sky
and lack of food.

Sage and scrub shiver—
skin mimics
their ripple as breath
precedes her steps,
hitting her face with
fleeting warmth
before sifting
to the ground.

Nose and ears kept low,
she roves, head moving
from side to side

seeking

a misplaced morsel,
something missed—
hunger surfacing,
as others burrow deep
to escape the cold.

With sore feet, she scratches
at dead logs, overturns
rocks

for a taste—

always alert for the stirrings
of field mice, jealous
of the red-tailed hawk
overhead.

15

Her toes flex when he falls
from the sky, talons
puncturing the hide
of some small creature.

His cries scissor through her.
She wants to speak,
her throat tight,

silent

for a lack of a moon.

Hyakutake

She tries to think back
 to the last time her hands
 sought and held, moved
 and felt
 under the sheets,
 tries to recall
 the last fantasy, when a jolt
 on the bus thrilled her.

She wonders when the retreat
 began,
 the slow curling in
 on herself, the dulling
 of sight and sound,
 sensation.

Gray folds into her,
 becomes increasingly darker;
 no amount of sun, no amount
 of rain can open her,
 this confused

 seed
 more content to
 burrow

 deeper
 into the earth, where everything
 is hard and dry.

It is a panicked dormancy,
 and she fears that, like
 the comet,

she won't be seen
 for another 17,000 years—
 that the brief interval
 will not return in her lifetime—

a time
when senses radiated in and out
and around—
a feeling that could fill
a bus but could be held
in a hand,
her fingers—

the heat

of a woman who has forgotten
the need to protect,
forgotten
who she is in a few days
of light.

Thaw

Babies die, a friend
told her, if they
are not held.
She reaches down,
touches herself, her fingers
ice—

no moisture—

her body
dry and cold—

like tundra—

where only a flickering
of life exists.
A careless footstep
can crush it
beyond repair,

partial reconstruction
possible during brief summers
under

the sun's gentle flirtation,
a pulse of rain.

She spreads herself *whitely*
against the ground—
lichen and stone press
into her, nothing
in the periphery but
a few fragile flowers,
the sky interrupted
by an occasional
bird fleck—

everything beyond reach.

19

The arctic throws
a sleepy arm over her—
breath slackens,
her heart slows

as she sinks into
its lullaby, melts

into its hold.

Inheritance

She lifts her shirt—
stitches run from sternum
to shoulder, the puffy
smile mimics the scar
where the left one
was removed last year.

Skin stretches tight
across her chest—

nipples gone,

a preventative procedure,
a decision made
as generations of her
fell into the ground—

her hand
stroked wisps of hair
from her sister's temples
as she watched the shallow
rise and fall,

the halt

of her chest—
a compact held over
the face

to be sure.

When she got home, she stood
in front of a mirror,
turned to the side, pressed
her own breasts down—

into her body—

thought of nursing her son,
thought of lovers,

21

machines.

Foam pads lie
in unopened packages—
hidden under bras,

under sachets
of violet and lavender—

an unopened drawer
that threatens to spill
its contents, a drawer
containing articles
pressed down,

entangled.

She reaches up, fingers
moving through, into

the absence—

a rib detected,

eyes locked
on her reflection
to keep from
looking down.

Butterfly

She still makes it
to the gym even though
she's tired, even though
something invisible
is stealing pieces
of her.

Sitting on the edge
of the ring, she wraps
each hand, the tape
drawn up, through
and around fingers,
around the thumb—

all sore.

It's in her joints now—
migrated from her vagina—
someplace deep—
to the extremes,
the very ends
of her body.

Teeth tighten laces,
and an hour spent
at the bags, thick black
bodies suspended
from the ceiling.
She beats against
soft flesh, pounds
the sickness out of her,
pounds it into faceless
forms, releases it
in sweat and breath.

The room disappears

Needs

While her husband dies
in the bedroom, she sits
by the woodstove
and crochets snowflakes.

Later she will soak them
in starch to make
Christmas ornaments.
She had tried

to lie with him under
the chenille bedspread,
but could never sleep,
could only

measure his breaths,
listen for irregularities.
The slightest rattle
stopped her heart.

So she rests in the rare medium
a lit room has in the dead
of night, a neighbor's
porch light the only star.

Later, she will check
his sheets, see if he needs
changing or some water,
reminded

of the first year
of her son's life, when
she attended to similar needs,
but instead of sitting

in another room, stood
over his crib, counted small,
perfect breaths for what
she thought was a lifetime.

November

Strawberry leaves begin
their slow curl—
a stubborn blossom
shakes under sleepy eyes
of impatient.

With her foot, she shifts
the pots on her porch
as if to make them
more comfortable—
prepares them

for dying—

others brace for loneliness,
for sleep.

At night, she wards off
soft frost that begins
at fingertips, creeps
slowly upward
and inward—

everything pulled tight
as if her insides
were stored
in a drawstring bag—

small, hard apples—

memories of summer,
of those fallen,
those gathered
before the sting
of winter.

CASCADES

Sandstone

She succumbs to erosion—
the slow burn of water,
the bruise of wind,
layers exposed
as rocks fall
from exposed roots.

Travelers run fingers
over walls, bones
visible where land
gives away—

pieces of her
tucked in knapsacks,
pockets—keepsakes
that crumble
with the slightest touch.

At night, she hears
things falling into water,
feels the slipping
with closed eyes—

each echo
held for years—

each voice shivering
over softened rock before
escaping to sky,
caught on the beaks
of ravens

that circle
in search of death,
flesh left and dropped—

gifts given to ground,
sinking in silt,
 in water,
carrying her
piece by piece

to unseen earth.

Rind

Her fingers seek the hard lump—
the size of a lemon,
the doctors told her—
 touches the space
 below her daughter's rib cage,
 thinks of fruit,

cool and yellow nestled

in angry flesh, grapes
 embedded in lungs,
 pomegranate seeds
 scattered in fistfuls
 in blood and bone,

her two year old's body
 helpless
 against ripening.

With bitter breath,
 she whispers,
 it will be O.K.
 into damp air,

remembers when
 she was pregnant,
 the melon that pushed up
 under skin,
 sweet and perfect.

She sang to her
 as if she could hear,
 was sure she could—
 and now, contemplates

survival without sound,

then turns off the humidifier,

30

allows silence
to fold into her,
touches small fingers,
squeezes lightly
as if to test

the firmness

of something green,
imagines insides loosening,
seeds migrating
to the surface

where they fall
into memory, into hands
where scents hold
deep and acid
under fingernails.

She presses flesh
as if to hold it together—
a language of desperation,

preservation—

and closes her eyes
to seasons
and tomorrow's
brutal sun.

—for Molly

Tangerine

His fingers tear into the thin rind—
a spray of waxy acid coats his cuticles,
strips the skin from tight
wedges that curl in
to protect themselves,

heaps the peelings at the foot
of the bed, inserts fingertips
into his mouth, and tastes
the tart half-moons wedged
beneath his nails,

with two thumbs, pries open
naked fruit between the lines.
His forefinger rubs the hollow
where segments meet, small
white hairs wind around his finger.

A membrane ruptures.
Teeth seek out hard pits as pieces
tear away. Juice runs
into his beard, across his hand,
onto sheets.

He wipes his face on the bedspread,
gathers up remnants, and looks
at white velvet insides
before giving them back
to her tiny hands.

Circles

She doesn't want her lover
to touch her, feigns
exhaustion before turning
to the wall, the space
between her shoulders
cold
as he strokes her back.

You feel good, he says.

In her chest, a gold nugget
the size of a walnut
lodges itself
between bottom ribs.
She has no name for it
but knows
it used to be bigger,
filling
inside caverns.

*Her family used to go
to Lava Lands. Her mother
made her put the gray,
porous stones back.*

*If everyone took a rock,
there'd be none left.*

The stone leaves
her hand, bounces once,
disappears.

*At night, she blurred
darkness into diamonds,
bending the ceiling*

with her eyes.
If she was still,
she floated up
into waves of jewels
and stayed there
until her father left,
 his fingers
stained gold.

She kisses her lover
 with mouth
 closed,
 knowing gold
 grows restless,
 threatens escape
 from her throat,
 through
 teeth.

She would hate him
 for taking it.

Some Shoshone believe in two souls.
One makes life in the body,
the other
 spirit.

The loss of one causes great sickness.
If both depart, you die.
She is certain no one
knows to blow three times
to assist her to the sky.

She feels him fall asleep,
 his hand jerking, marking
 the point of dreams.
 She listens to his uneven breath,
 closes her eyes, and imagines
 the cords of her muscles
 stitching the nugget in place,
 wrapped up like a spider's nest—

safe from vandals and magpies
and their desire to steal
things than shine.

34

Fly

The Hoh Trail lies before her,

clean—

new snow
erasing all evidence
of previous travel.

The track of a raccoon
or an unidentified bird
interrupt the path—
the ownership briefly considered
before moving on.

Her husband bends over
to examine some bear scat,
the hood of his parka pulled
tightly around his face.

*This isn't the first time
she hasn't recognized him—*

*it has happened more lately
in more familiar surroundings—
in rituals
of gardening, coffee, the drive home
from work.*

With his attention diverted,
she creates *distance*,
and with silent footsteps,
enters the rain forest—

seven hundred years old,

a sign at the ranger station
had said. Fire destroyed

what previously existed—

36

*and she thinks of heat
afforded by newly found lovers—
never prepared for the dying
out, flames signalling
beginnings—*

endings lost in moments—

in years.

She pulls down her scarf—
her breath escapes,
follows her like spirits
while patterns pull at her—
sun and shade confusing
the trail with games
of light and dark,

stillness interrupted
by powder sifting
through nettles
and the choking noise
of a frozen river.

She startles a lone Roosevelt elk—
in its panic, it twists and lunges
through brush lining the bank
before vaulting across the streambed,
hooves slipping on mud and ice.

The noise brings
her husband running—

*afraid
he's missed something.*

While she waits for him, a bald eagle

flies overhead, carrying something
she can't quite make out—
something precious, silver,
held close to the body—

37

*its cries fall from the sky,
rest on her skin,
settle like snow—*

covering everything.

Harvest

Lunar eclipse October 26, 1996

We watch the moon hold her breath
from a bench overlooking
the industrial district—

low moans of distant
barges float across
vacant lots while

we contemplate higher ground,
needing darkness, stars—
silhouettes.

The moon draws her shade
for a moment of privacy
against persistent trembling

of freight trains, empty hands,
and the urge
to gather.

Flirtation

The ground begins
 its gentle stirring—

shaking flowers undress
 under breath
 of new wind,

whispers run
 down stems—
 roots
 clutch and release
 frozen soil.

Lichen stretch
 against warm rocks—
 a few insects sigh,

the tundra
 silent

except for the half-yawn
 of coyotes, the blink
 of eyes against sun.

At night, petals
 reach down,
 touch themselves—

each life craving
 promises
 of the thaw.