

Portland State University

PDXScholar

---

Dissertations and Theses

Dissertations and Theses

---

5-1-1997

# Habitats

Sydney Jean Thompson  
*Portland State University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/open\\_access\\_etds](https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/open_access_etds)



Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

---

## Recommended Citation

Thompson, Sydney Jean, "Habitats" (1997). *Dissertations and Theses*. Paper 5408.  
<https://doi.org/10.15760/etd.7282>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations and Theses by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: [pdxscholar@pdx.edu](mailto:pdxscholar@pdx.edu).

## 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.

### COMMITTEE APPROVALS:

[REDACTED]  
Henry Carlile, Chair

[REDACTED]  
Elaine Limbaugh

[REDACTED]  
Primus St. John

[REDACTED]  
Ruben Sierra  
Representative of the Office of  
Graduate Studies

### DEPARTMENT APPROVAL:

[REDACTED]  
Dr. Shelley Reece, Chair  
Department of English

\*\*\*\*\*

ACCEPTED FOR PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY BY THE  
LIBRARY

by [REDACTED] on 29 May 1997

## 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

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### PACIFIC

Sunset	1
Elm	2
Orbit	4
Glass	6
Boxing	8
Swim	10
drift	12

### SKELETON CAVES

Hollow	14
Hyakutake	16
Thaw	18
Inheritance	20
Butterfly	22
Needs	24
November	26

### CASCADES

Sandstone	27
Rind	29
Tangerine	31
Circles	32
Fly	35
Harvest	38
Flirtation	39

**PACIFIC**

## Sunset

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

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

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 misplaces 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

in a series of jabs, uppercuts,  
and crosses as fists  
move up and down  
softened leather  
while her feet circle,  
dance,  
dive forward and back,  
her body avoiding  
the bag's heavy swing  
back towards her, the two  
of them awkward partners—

she,  
the one with feet  
on the ground.

A drop of dried blood  
on the floor captures  
her between bells.  
It is a perfect, jagged circle—  
the color of the empty barn  
where she grew up—  
                    rusted red—  
the life gone out of it.

Sweat drips  
into a misshapen ring  
around her—she feels  
contained—

hands heavy,  
huge,  
helpless.

Behind her, in the mirror,  
a man side-steps in the ring,  
circles within the ropes,  
throwing punches at shadows,  
rendering unconscious  
an opponent he can not see.

## 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.

28

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.

## 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.