

First Snow
Naomi Neal ('13)

The first snow tumbles down,
ragged scraps
too tiny even to land
except on that inner skin
where I keep California

She shivers in her bikini
not bothering anymore
to wrap her arms around herself, but
letting them hang
loose from the shoulders
like strips of fly-tape,
dotted blackly with goosebumps
She sleeps all day and smells like rotting
She knows something I'm afraid to find out
Something that is a matter of time

It used to be a matter of space
there on the last coast
teetering always on the edge of
big blue nothing
one hand out-flung for balance,
to keep from falling off,
the world busy behind her
with preparations for an artificial apocalypse,
threatening always
to crowd her off her balance
No wonder she used to dream of the desert

(Here in the midwest
land-locked and marooned
she's not so sure
whether that crowding wasn't
really an embrace)

Tonight in Chicago,
which is nothing like a desert,
the first snow is falling.
She gets up naked
in the middle of the night,
walks around the room,
runs her fingers over the spines of my books,
leaves me to my snoring
and my convoluted dreams
She sits on the windowsill
presses her forehead to the cold glass
watches the paper-scrap snowbits
twist slowly downward

California wonders if the snowflakes know they are doomed.
They told her today
this first snowfall wouldn't stick, would melt
upon the fevered earth.
She peers downward but can't make out the ground
from up on the sixth floor.
The sound of laughter,
shrill and broken in the next room,
reminds her of the building at her back:
ten floors' worth of souls and concrete
pressing her forward and out
She listens for their roar
and feels for a moment
the old warmth
across her temples

I wake before dawn to find
California
pressed against the window
the beads of her spine
showing through the skin
belly sagging loosely
bruises deep-embedded in the legs
like secret amethysts.
There's been a lot more of her golden hair
left in the brush lately.
I rise, abrupt and ungraceful,
take her hand and lead her
wordlessly
back to bed.
Under the blankets,
we snuggle together
I press my nose into her cold neck,
smell the salt there,
frown.
I don't like it when she does this.
She's not been well.
I want to keep her warm.