

The University of North Carolina  
at Greensboro

JACKSON LIBRARY



CQ

no. 954

Gift of Judith C. Root.

COLLEGE COLLECTION

TURTLE  
"

by

Judith C. Root  
"

A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of the Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro  
1972

Approved by

Robert Watson  
Thesis Adviser

ROO, JUDITH C. Turtle. (1972) Directed by: Dr. Robert Watson.  
Pp. 48.

This manuscript consists of 34 poems which progress, roughly, from the more personal to the less personal. Their common element is realistic description, often overlaid with a suggestion of that elusive force which makes things happen the way they do (or don't). In these poems, we observe that other reality not only in the real things that surround us, but in ourselves as well. The question arises, then, whether the seed of that unexplainable force is generated inside each one of us.

## APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee  
of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The University of  
North Carolina at Greensboro.

Thesis  
Advisor

Robert K. Watson

Examination  
Committee Members

Francis A. Laine

Fred Chappell

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Poems in this collection have appeared in The Greensboro Review, Yankee, The Brown Bag, and The West Coast Review and will appear in Place Magazine.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
I . . . . .	1
Turtle. . . . .	2
Winter in California. . . . .	5
Eight Week Winter . . . . .	6
Parts . . . . .	10
Forms of Love . . . . .	11
If. . . . .	13
Caught. . . . .	14
The Rose and the Serpent. . . . .	15
Flower Poems. . . . .	16
II. . . . .	24
Father in the Kitchen . . . . .	25
Tony's Story. . . . .	26
Lady by the Sea . . . . .	29
Earth Angel . . . . .	31
Substitute Teaching . . . . .	32
III . . . . .	34
Man in Brown. . . . .	35
November Night. . . . .	37
Love Song . . . . .	38
Weathervane . . . . .	40
Round Dance . . . . .	42
Little Mysteries. . . . .	44

413047

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

I.

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

Everyone of us  
has a little turtle  
inside.

Turtle

We tried to drop  
you off at the river  
on our way out  
of town.

Rain cleared  
our windshield  
and we thought  
you'd be at home  
happy as a clam  
natural, never  
wanting back in our world  
of dishpans and wood floors.

Goodbye, we said,  
we'll remember  
your orange  
spots, the rise  
of circles  
on your shell.

Goodbye.

Hope you have a happy  
life.



But when we hit  
Wisconsin, we saw you  
following us,  
your lump large  
on the road.  
We could hear you  
sloshing and couldn't ignore  
your scent.

It wasn't easy  
at Mt. Rushmore  
with the mud,  
but we thought  
you'd feel loved  
by those four faces,  
a part of history  
in our time,  
and we left you  
moving on.

In Montana  
you loomed  
in our rear-view  
mirror. Go back,  
we said, to your own river.

We don't need you  
anymore.

These roads cut  
mountains down  
to size, and we have  
to get along. There's no  
turning back, we said,  
and turned you out  
again.

After  
weeks, we reached  
the end.  
You were there  
meeting us  
with a grin,  
your shell smooth  
with suffering  
but glowing  
still.

Winter in California

You eat oranges,  
Held up to the light  
they glow  
like another sun,  
while you  
black against that brightness  
shade me.

First you cut off the top,  
then spiral the outside.  
The peel comes off in a curl  
and juice flows through your fingers.  
You slice the meat in clean circles,  
sucking them one by one.

My mother taught me to cut them  
in half and with my teeth  
tear out their pulp,  
but for years I've used a spoon,  
picking the peel bit by bit  
until the bare orange, cupped  
in my palm, dry in its inner skin,  
was ready to be sectioned.

Eight Week Winter

i.

I sit here in the clutter  
of our lives. Clothes go back  
two days, or three. Arms lap  
arms, strangle legs. Shoes,  
like leftover feet, wait for  
someone to step in. Open  
letters in our bed and books, ping-  
pong paddles from last week's game.

And I wish the rain would stop dumping  
mud on our road and house, plugging up  
our lives. Already it's got the electricity  
and who knows what will go next.

ii.

Eight week winter,  
if that.  
First leaves fall and apples  
cling like ornaments until  
Christmas. Trees bud in February  
despite grey rain that bottles  
us behind windows and darkens  
our drinking water.

iii.

The days click on like ducks  
in a shooting gallery.

Somehow I want to stop  
them from falling, help them  
up straight and turn  
down the speed.

If they dodge the shot  
they still go down  
at the end of the row.

And I'm no help at all.

iv.

I stomp spring grass  
circling to rout  
snakes from our nest.

Round and round  
I take over your job.  
Still weeds grow up  
around me--filling  
your place.

## Parts

I found a bit  
of arm in a red  
drawer last night.

China pale and alone  
it rolled against  
the lacquered wood.

I shut the drawer  
and checked my arm  
for the slot  
still raw  
where the piece  
dropped out.

Since then dents  
show up all over.  
In corners blocks  
of flesh gather  
with dust--  
solid, anonymous.



Forms of Love

It can't live  
alone, flying too high  
for hands or  
ladders, even space  
ships.

But what about the solid  
shape of cups and saucers,  
leaky faucets, cars and bills  
and scrambled eggs?

Sometimes I think  
an evil will invades  
our talk, its form  
is words that strangle

as you pull tight  
the ropes of logic  
tight and tighter  
my throat  
constricting wordless  
my mouth  
bloody, eyes  
dulled now and open

staring inside  
looking  
for the emptiness  
the hole  
where I can drown  
quietly.

Staring inside  
looking  
for the dark  
I want now

its cold, its walls  
like a cloud  
I can see  
but not touch.

If I pull myself  
in, you'll be right  
and I want you  
to be right.

I want the ease  
of dark without  
the white beyond  
the form of love  
this poem.

If

If I let

my hair

loose

will it strangle

me

like a bushy-

tailed cat

in the night?

Caught

Caught

in a jar, love,

the lid

slips

open.

I swallow air.

The Rose and the Serpent

I want to shed them all,  
my lives, like skins

sink below 30  
and catch the spark  
that brought me here

instead  
of boxed and scented  
like a rose my mother  
picked and tended.

## Flower Poems

i.

Daisies on my desk  
lean inside the glass.  
Their stems dangle  
short of water.

Slow petals fall  
from hard bald centers.

ii.

You come in the night  
three days late  
carrying straw flowers  
in a chocolate  
milk carton.  
But I know you  
too well.

Next time  
you bring flower wires  
and tape  
the dry blooms  
to last.

iii.

Once you brought  
wisteria pods.  
Tiny velvet  
shrouds, each held three  
seeds from light and cold.

Inside, the heat  
teased them  
into birth,  
shattered their comfortable  
shields, abruptly  
waking us to dark.



iv.

I wake with a sunflower  
pressed to my face.

It's always too early  
for such brightness,  
too easy a leap  
from dark dreams.

How my flower,  
do you bloom  
so sweetly?

The seed that sprung  
you long gone dead.

v.

It burns along its branches

like tiny tongues

telling me

warm secrets.

I don't need a fire.

Scotch broom on my hearth.

vi.

The rose you gave me  
has faded to pink.  
Its blood drained  
slowly and now fragile  
as an ash it clings  
to its shape.  
A touch could turn  
it to dust.

vii.

My mother gave me  
the biggest plant  
I ever had.  
Its roots were gnarled,  
humping out of the pot  
it wouldn't stay put in.

In spite of myself  
I watered it daily  
until a pale green  
leaf curled out of  
a new shoot. Clear  
as jelly at first,  
it thickened quickly.

viii.

I like dry  
flowers best anyway.  
In the corner,  
teazles tall as walls  
attract strange cats,  
drawing them to battle.

When I look their way,  
they nod spikey heads.

Father in the garden

There isn't much more

the birds, the sun

the little things

the garden

in a first grade the morning

blades, not the quiet

there is only

there is only

It's only as the

II.

There is that

they will

the world of

"Besides, what if there's just  
one big spider up there somewhere?"

--a resident  
Kingsville, Texas  
(1971)

Father in the Kitchen

Your left hand grips  
the knife, pulls white  
old knuckle scars,

Fingers hidden  
in a fist guide the slicing  
blade, set the quick chop,  
steel to wood,  
steel to wood.

It's only an onion.

Though in their barrel  
they roll  
like whites of eyes.

## Tony's Story

I know the tricks the eye  
can play, lines slanting  
like fans that pull a pure  
line beyond itself, smiling  
faces hidden in leaves  
that seem to be trees.

You see, I know better  
than cliches that tell us  
life's a game.

What good are pretty words,  
metaphors we see for  
things we don't?

My eyes are pale, so weak  
I tried to fool illusion  
with a shade. And for awhile  
dark glasses seemed to help.

But always I could feel the pull,  
the pale notion droning behind.  
I knew it when it came and who  
knows how long before.



200 lbs., muscle and will,  
a mind I work with books,  
but it was stronger still.  
I lost the fight by  
fighting and don't remember  
going under.

It started at chess.  
Glass blur over my mind,  
tunnelling to eyes  
where I could see myself.

Straight across, John stared  
his cross-eyed stare,  
his face passive as a pie.  
Under my eyes, black and white  
squares pulsed pawns and knights.

That's all I remember.  
John brought me here  
and they've watched me  
for a week, sure now  
what it's not.

Glossy photos of dyes  
in my brain, colorful rows  
of fluids and juices,  
that wily vine on a slide.

Let them probe and smile  
smug behind their masks.

My struggle's over,  
yours has just begun.

## Lady by the Sea

In a dark green shawl,  
fringe tracking loose sand,  
she wears her age lightly.

He stands stiff in wind  
on the cliff that protects  
her below, watches her bend  
over pocks in wet sand,  
pick abalone and olive  
shells, catch them in loose  
folds of green wool.

Animal bodies caught  
in the ocean's tongue  
slide out to sea  
leaving new shells  
her fingers lift free.

She is learning,  
she tells him,  
to live alone  
stack driftwood sticks  
in frail teepees,  
let air into the fire.

Its quick light finds  
the shells, catches colors  
that sun only fades.

Cradled in green wool  
they shine, she smiles.

The shell she offers  
is smooth as skin.

## Earth Angel

When he left she tried to fly,  
but rooms were too small,  
ceilings too low, keeping out sky.

Her feet, small fins, fought  
but couldn't keep her high.  
Wing tip brushed walls,  
cracked and broke.

When he came home she said  
it was a cup she'd dropped,  
and he never noticed  
the heavenly gleam.

Substitute Teaching

Pescadero High School

Butano Cut Off Road. Early autumn  
your school straight and modern  
cuts into brown hills.

With the frost, pumpkins, fresh  
orange, pop up around it.

Puressa, the fat one you say, 's  
gone south for the rainy season,  
and Francesco's pouring poison  
on rats eating the artichokes.

My knowledge of biology  
ends with Rachel Carson,  
and you don't understand  
the sea around us.

So we talk.

Where're you from?

La Honda.

What a drag.

Nothing to do there.

No gas station.

Winter, the stench of pumpkins  
reaches the coast. Rains green  
the hillsides and fog settles  
like snow in the forked fingers  
of the artichoke plants.

Your pumpkin seed faces  
wait dully for freedom  
from chalk and remedial biology.  
Even your heroes would be  
rejects elsewhere. Pimples  
and letterman sweaters.  
The district's straight  
record of loss.

But in front,

You've probably seen him yourself,  
on the beach behind the fence,  
His clothes a brown shade  
around a body that shivers  
even in sunlight.

How warm are his eyes  
shaded with a hat,  
But you know they follow  
the ball playing off.

III.

They say he carries a  
pistol and on one day  
didn't shoot.

Just because it's raining  
in Portland, doesn't mean  
we've lost the sun.

And that's all you've  
seen and, though you know  
never tell.

One of these days he will  
get his hands good off  
and you'll see the  
best of him.



Man in Brown

You've probably seen him yourself,  
on the bench behind the fence.  
His clothes a brown shade heaped  
around a body that shivers  
even in sunlight.

You never see his eyes  
shaded with a hat,  
but you know they follow  
the boys playing ball.

They say he carries a brown  
papersack and no one knows  
what's inside.

And I'll bet you've wondered  
his name, though children  
never ask.

One of them thought he was God  
or his father gone off long ago  
come back to see what  
he'd grown up to be.

That got it started.

All the children, like you,  
began to watch their fathers  
and wonder about their sons.

November Night

Dry weeds brush

my window

framed with

colored wool

on spools.

The sleeping sounds

of children circle

in the hall.

From nowhere

a small wind

touches tumbleweed

suspended from a string.

It spins.

## Love Song

(written July 20, 1969, the night  
they landed on the moon)

Just give me a glass  
filled with clear green wine  
and I'll drink you a toast,  
love, to always be thine.

I'll ride a white hound  
to the edge of the sea  
and hope that you'll never  
come looking for me.

I'll write you a sonnet  
to shut in a bottle  
and grow you some parsley  
to flavor your stew.

I'll hone you a needle  
to sew your own shirts.  
I'll starve myself naked  
to be your white bone.

And when you have covered  
the world with your seed,  
come back to my garden  
and give me your leave.

I'll grow my hair long,  
 love, and wrap my own shroud.  
 My eyes will be birdseed,  
 my body a cloud.

If then you do love me,  
 just get in a plane,  
 come up there to join me  
 and we will make rain.

## Weathervane

You're such a simple lady, love,  
weather turns your moods  
and you in turn turn mine.

Rain springs tears that wash  
you clean. I steep  
in the floods you send.

Hurricanes are all your own  
no matter what the name.  
Your winds wind up and clutch  
my windows, blow them out.

Snow calms us to a hush  
no barometer could show.  
The needle lost control  
springing days for hours.

Tornados whip us both  
spinning smooth loose plains.  
Trees and houses, cows a pig.  
All are following where you lead.

The sun your sign  
 catches you in gold.  
 You shine without a word  
 and turn clear light on me.

Each traces its own circle,  
 shooting and slipping like light.

Man with black  
 hair and pointed ears,

was rounded into a circle,  
 hair and forehead,

looking and feeling  
 the same.

Looking to with silent  
 eyes, you look at me,

I see that woman  
 with white hair,

you see that man  
 with black hair.

They speak as by their words,  
 to eyes with their words and words.

Under my long hair I have  
 that old still, I know.

## Round Dance

Two figures on a disc  
top a music box wound tight.  
Each traces its own circle,  
wheeling and dipping like birds.

Man with black  
hair and pointed nose,  
woman rounded into a shawl.  
Male and female.  
Mother and father.

Moving to each other  
they come into us.  
I am that woman  
your mother.  
You are that man  
my father.

They catch us in their dance.  
We move with them round and round.  
Under my long skirt I have no  
feet but still, I spin.



You move around me spiraling  
wide. The music takes us.  
We forget to stop, or touch.

The way that it is,

pulling inside while

you feel the rest,

my back your touch,

being the things we are

and being a moment,

but not a moment's time,

ending in there,

with you here, filling

in space where it

shouldn't be, sharing in

space a moment that was

what it is, just a moment

with us, just a moment

and then there's nothing

left but you and me.

The way it is.

## Little Mysteries

i.

You know what it is.  
Building inside while  
you dust or read  
or brush your teeth.

Doing two things at once,  
like being pregnant.  
But it's no other life  
growing in there.

Only your own. Filling  
up inside where it  
shouldn't be, shoring up  
cracks & canyons that were  
meant to be free & open  
until it takes you over  
and then there's nothing  
left for you at all.

You are it.

ii

They're the ones  
who always drive  
while you walk.

Who stare because  
you haven't got  
a car around you.

Who pull up alongside  
& lean across whispering  
"Do you go down?"

Before you answer,  
they're off.

iii.

Especially in the morning  
before you're quite awake,  
they come with questions.

And they nod & pull  
their fingers for  
you never have the answer.

But even if you did,  
they probably couldn't hear  
you screaming.

iv.

He's bigger than  
you remember  
& he's got some-  
thing on you.

Shoves you up  
against a red white  
& blue mailbox.

At home you wait for  
his whine on the phone:  
he's coming  
to get you.

Then pull the chain  
lock & leave on one light.  
Slip out & run.

But you can't get away.  
He is the friend  
who lets you in  
to hide.

v.

In the beginning

I was careful.

I didn't want them  
crying in my bushes

Or following my car  
waiting for me to run  
out of gas. So I always  
carried an extra can.

When I couldn't make it  
start,  
I'd kindle wet twigs and  
burn it all up.