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WOMAN'S COLLEGE  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA  
GREENSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA

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HONORS PAPERS

1949/1950

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Greensboro, North Carolina

1951

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POEMS

By  
Jean Farley

Submitted as an Honors Paper  
in the  
Department of English

THE WOMAN'S COLLEGE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA

GREENSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA

1950

## SHARP AND SMOOTH

### I

The sea shifts and turns in its dune-smooth skin  
to list in toward shore for a final tapered heaping  
before it is toppled and rolled out thin.

A yolk-fed turtle trundles across the sand  
and slides from the edge of a beach  
scalloped over and over in white and tan.

Above on a tilting ledge of wind  
a sea hawk planes and waits  
for the turtle to reach a depth to dive in.

### II

Sand and water heave from sea to land,  
settle and mix or split themselves on tips  
to rake all the shells into sand.

I walk up the thick beach stumbling,  
stretch out and settle along the heat.  
Within my skin the water's retch and fall fumble

for a shell to scrape into sand.  
I sleep by walking a see-saw up to its balance,  
and wake at the tip that grates on land.

## CITY AQUARIUM

The room extends beyond a wall of glass  
but there the air is water  
for fish to breathe and slide in,  
ignoring fingers at their placard: Great Sea Bass.  
Cave minnows from New Mexico  
nudge along a floor of stone and mortar,  
their eyes covered over by milky skin;  
and a cake of mud exhumed in Africa  
lies chipped away to show a lung fish  
curled alive around its own brittle fins.

Out in sunlight a park extends  
from the fourteenth to the fifteenth street  
with triangular green and benches cemented  
between for leisure and lunch hour use.  
People in pairs who push through the heat,  
timing their arms by the click of heels,  
talk of other interests and the news  
(while listening to find and interest  
which surely is only concealed).  
Soon it will be later, and a few  
start down the corner subway entrance  
where a turnstile paid means passage to a room.

## SPIRAL

I came down from the upper floor of the house,  
crossed the lawn to climb this smooth green hill,  
and soon I'll go back to the three-tiered house  
where sometimes the houle of an owl will slide  
on the crisping sound of insect shrills,  
or sometimes an oil-black snake will coil  
around a scaling sycamore hide.

For this is the way I sleep and wake:  
probing a spiral in-ward, then rim-ward  
with one end an owl, the other a snake.  
The coils between are loose and blurred,  
neither knotted, pointed, notched nor roweled,  
but the way that I mean to take  
is wound up, fastened--and set aside now.



### THE HEAD OF THE PLAIN

The plain has pulled in tight to earth.  
(But who can curl safe against a globe?)  
The sun barbs spiral in  
and horses of former barbarian stock  
use hooves to probe the thin dry skin  
of its enduring back.

Between in-pressed shoulder rocks  
a great stone head leans forward  
toward the ground, and thick eyes eye  
the mouth-covering brown  
where men kneeled once without a gibe  
for the face which is noseless and unfrowned.

The globe gyrates through all skies  
with still the plain pulling in to its side,  
but something inward shivers:  
up through the earth a spear track comes  
until the quaking back is split,  
and the head falls in upon its eyes.

### ENERGY COLORS

A sharp-winged swallow folded in toward shore  
and wheeled the reeds to swing out reaping  
an insect inch above the water floor.  
And this might be--flames in a field  
of corn almost all dried for heaping  
after the slivers of brush fire had peeled  
from weeds to slice into stalks at the knee  
--the yellows, reds and greens of energy.

'One bright day in the middle of the night  
two dead men got up to fight.  
Back to back they faced each other,  
drew their swords and shot each other.'  
And this might be--the rattle-tailed,  
trapped-mouse movements of wrists at night,  
circulating on grey nail-threads  
which first have tangled through the head.

A bird would think wings worse than walking  
if all of the winds were dead,  
and wrists will be strung on the twisting string  
when the head can glean no yellow, green or red.

### DEATH OF A TURTLE

The sickness had shown for weeks  
in the softening of a shell  
chipped in former battles.  
Then today the turtle died,  
stretched on a hummock  
where his neck reached further  
than ever when alive,  
and his head wagged slowly  
on the last inland wash of tide.  
His was a death in the river-held swamp,  
his heirs were three--  
vultures who would have been ten  
had a deer died in antlered pomp.  
One flesh-headed bird circled the sky,  
another hunched in a tree,  
but first-comer perched on the turtle's shell  
and feasted behind an eye.

Now the birds of song  
fly westward to a pine  
and the vultures leave without cry.  
Slowly tonight a soft wood stump  
slides into a fox-fire shine  
to light the rise of the tide along  
a neck and half shelled hump  
until that flesh floats high  
for passage to another swamp  
where other shrug-backed birds will dine.

OUT IN AN HOUR

This is the day for a celebration  
at the big red rock where troops surrendered.  
I may get down for some great oration  
in the square that I've watched them extending  
from the sixteenth to the seventeenth street.  
I'll leave this four-bar and seven-year window wasted  
the way you bite off a brown piece of apple meat  
and blow it out fast, untasted.



FROG WENT A-COURTIN'

Yesterday the bait was frogs,  
and bits of membrane on bone  
are dried now by a chrysalis on a log.  
You lower them on a weighted string  
--to spring and lure and drown--  
then twitch the end to make them spring.  
Frog went a-courtin' he did ride,  
sword and pistol by his side--

Fish ease gaping up to eye,  
to mouth and judge the hook.  
The green is soaked and sucked out like a dye  
until skin sloughs or is scraped from the hook  
and another bright green frog is tried--  
seventeen frogs and the catch was small.  
Frog went a-courtin' he did ride,  
sword and pistol by his side--

AND DEATH

Not possibly can the many-bladed twitch  
and tear, a haggling down to beef,  
precede the tendon's sudden pitch  
into the jet-clean slice of a knife.

# BEASTS FROM THE GESTA ROMANORUM

The cat that eyed a bony rat  
was really quite unwilling,  
for he had dreamed of something small and fat  
without so many pointed teeth.

But even a dream had not prepared him  
for the "peep" from a barrel of ale  
which had sat on the counter, quiet and prim  
through all the years of his youth.

Blowing away a whirl of foam, he saw  
a slick-headed mouse that spouted out:  
"Brother, pick me out of this terrible maw."  
The cat knew just the thing to do.

"You will first swear to come whenever I call?"  
"Brother, I promise that faithfully."  
"Swear, by God and his saints--large and small."  
"I swear by God and all of his saints."

The cat plucked out the mouse and sent him free,  
until on a later day, feeling his hunger,  
he called aloud: "Mouse, come unto me."  
But the mouse from his den--refused.

The cat's reply was: "But you swore."  
"I made that oath while drunken to the core."

FIFTY YEAR OLD SICK WOMAN

Tweezers at my ear go mincing  
after cotton, careful and pick-thin  
with now and then a prick like an old wrong word.  
The branch that scrapes my window in the wind  
slept last summer an intricate dream  
of dove-tailed leaves and leaf-winged birds  
bantering in their warm room of green.  
Then winter pinched off all but one grey sparrow.  
Once that after-twitch of words  
caused views of myself as victim-hero  
escaped from Turks who cut tongues off at the root,  
or a vague envy of the deaf-mute.  
But then I slept my dreams in color  
and awoke more intricate than a sickness  
timed to the steel-white tweezers' click.



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