

GONZALES

SUSAN FREEMAN

The wind bites hard down the long valley,
grey barns weathered by it; the gullied mountains scored.
It rises each afternoon, a whip in a hidden hand, inescapable,
bending the hedgerow eucalyptus, tearing
at the shirts on the farmworkers' backs and in the hair
of children playing in the field behind the school.

Hunkering down on the animate highway,
the town feels grievously sad in its squat, tan buildings.
Shop windows stare blankly at the black ribbon of cars zooming south.
The heat builds. Old men shuffle past Jim's Liquor,
past Váldez Produce and the Tru-Value Hardware
to a lunch of quesadilla y cerveza at El Famoso Café.

The straight-arrow highway splits the land and who lives here,
the bungalow town from the gated wineries in the hills.
Passing through a thousand times on their way to L.A.
who ever sees the old men or the flapping sheets flash-drying
in the heat of small backyards; the women with strong hands
hanging their family's colors out in the wind?
Across that road, at the flat bridge, the Salinas River sinks
under its sand. To the eye it's bone-dry til the rains come,
lost to the summer, invisible, surfacing miles away near the sea.
What runs strong runs hidden from the eye.
The subtle lines drawn in a town with many histories:
who leads and who follows, and whose words make the rules.

Here, the river has a salty name, the taste of hard labor,
given by invaders who wondered at the wetland slough,
the far tidal flats pulsing into the land. Outsiders,
they made this their place, a land grant, a rancho,
usurped when new strangers came, English in their mouths,
looking for ground to pleasure their ploughs.

Once named, a place is learned, known beyond itself,
nostalgically held in the mouth of its children
or forgotten by those who chose to run away.
No one can write it like it really is, say the hills.
The town and the valley agree, singing in the dry sun.
And the river. The river that quenches no thirst.

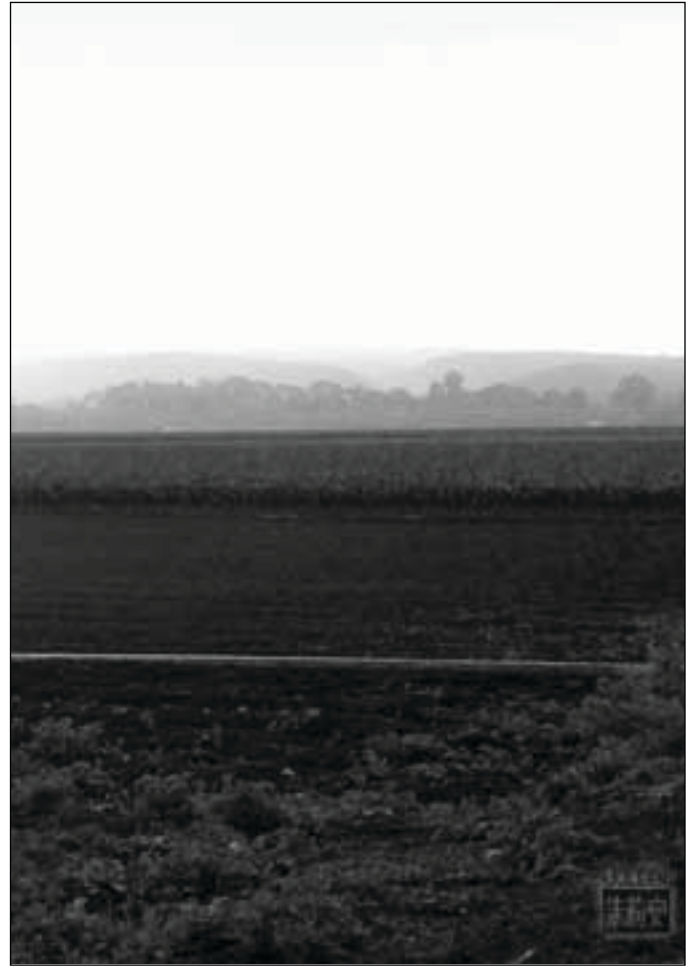
ANCHOVIES

SUSAN FREEMAN

Once a year they crowd the harbor,
wash its sandbar mouth with silver,
and the old men, nostrils flared,
elbow the rough railings on Aldo's pier
and remember
full holds and nights of fog,
the flashing gifts of the sea.

The bay is full of anchovy
and the last of the hot days
are teasing the life out of summer.
Ten years ago fish arrived so thick
the harbor master called out the dredge

JULEEN JOHNSON



to clear the stinking harvest
so the rich could sail their yachts beyond the jetty
and the tuna boats could shelter for the night.
All September the town reeked.
The beaches were deserted,
the wharf cafés emptied of tourists,
and the seaside was ours once more.
For that short while, dusk
smelled like Riva Trigoso on the Ligurian coast,
and the old Italian sailors,
Genovese still on their tongues,
curled around their coffee mugs at Gilda's
and dreamed of the steep cliffs of home.

All that before and their world.
But tonight, moon round and rising,
and I hashing out words,
the cat caught it on the wind
and called me to the open door.
We stood out on the front porch a mile from the sea,
sniffing the evening air as the sun slid to sleep.
I thought I heard accordion music, dolce canzone,
and the sound of winches hauling in line.
Eyes closed, the sea was where the street had been,
the porch our timbered wharf,
and we were fishermen riding
on a darkening ocean of sky.