



Blue Dress
Alison Townsend



WHITE PINE PRESS

A World of Voices



This e-publication has been brought to you by White Pine Press

Copyright © 2003 | ALL RIGHTS RESERVED | White Pine Press

www.whitepine.org

P.O. Box 236
Buffalo, NY 14201
(716) 627-4665 (Voice)
(716) 627-4665 (Fax)

Email: wpine@whitepine.org

We urge you to support your local booksellers. If you are unable to obtain a White Pine Press book, you may order directly from the press. Books will be sent fourth class book rate (allow 3-4 weeks). Add **\$3.00 for postage and handling, plus an additional \$1.00 for First Class and an additional \$2.00 for UPS and foreign orders (UPS charge subject to change)**. New titles will be shipped as they are released; we will not provide order confirmation. Prices and other information are subject to change without notice. Please make checks payable to White Pine Press. Shipping charges quoted are per order

Please fill out and print our online **Order Form** <http://www.whitepine.org/form.htm> and send via U.S. mail. Or you may fax your order to: (716) 627-4665 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week)

Credit Card Telephone Orders: Call (716) 627-4665
Monday-Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., EST

Books Make Perfect Gifts! If you would like to send White Pine Press books as gifts, we are happy to enclose a gift card. Please provide gift card information, as well as the appropriate billing and shipping information on your order form. We will be happy to gift wrap your selections for an additional \$1.00.

Lifeline

The woman is in love with the poem. It is a short poem, carved from ice in the shape of a deer . Its antlers are twigs coated with silver. Each hoofprint reflects movement, the light of changing stars. It is a poem of snow, a story flung like a fistful of winter across house, forest, field. But it is not a cold poem. Somewhere deep within the deer's body a small red berry quivers, names itself as heart.

The woman has dreamed the poem. It has come to her in the night, pulled, while she sleeps, from the breath of her childhood. It has plunged and moved, galloping in a deer's body for many miles, across snow-encrusted fields. The deer navigates by instinct, its head raised windward in search of home.

At rest now, stabled in her hands, the deer is very still. It is a statue that conveys its message in silence. The woman holds the deer close, until it melts, returning, she does not know where, her own journey beginning with the return. There is red in her palms. Starlight and winter darkness. She does not know what to do with so much sacred water.

Epilogue

The past isn't over; it isn't even past.
—William Faulkner

Because I'm moving from the house where we lived when we were married, and because I want to mark exactly the spot where we buried each cat, I call and ask you to come and help me remember. You come, of course. As I know you will. As you always do. But I'm not prepared for the sight of you at the front door, your thin face thinner, your dark blond hair threaded with more grey than I thought you'd ever have, infinitely strange and infinitely familiar.

And you are not prepared for me. *Squaw Valley?* you ask, reading the words on my purple sweatshirt, as if wondering what I could possibly have done there without you, high in those mountains you introduced me to, that snowy range, those Sierras that were always ours together, hiking or skiing, the bright air sluicing into our lungs. How many miles did I cover, walking beside you, the scuffed boots you gave me in 1976 still the ones I wear?

We chat, though I am so busy watching you that I instantly forget what we're talking about, noticing only how your hands shake. I rub my tea mug against my palm until I hear a small clinking and catch you looking at my new gold band.

Outside, we walk to the copse of white pine where we buried three cats, one in each season but spring. You returned each time to dig the grave and weep with me. I recall the places exactly, it turns out, but know also it is important to do this together, the small bones that lie beneath us our family when we were young.

In the house I show you the stone carver's sketch. Nothing mawkish, but something flat—a paving stone really—inscribed with each cat's name and date. I place it on the table before you. You look at the page, framing it with both hands, leaning into the wood as if you need it to hold you up. You look and look, but do not speak, though I wish you would. Only later will I wish I'd touched your hand.

When it's time to go, you linger, tell me you remember repairing the rungs on the dining room chairs I still use. I give you the last few things I've found, cleaning out closets. You tell me of your trip to Europe—a summer vacation, tracing the route your new wife's father took through the Alps in the war. I mention my father, D-Day, though I don't know exactly where he was.

They have all that stuff mapped, you say. And they probably do. But I don't know, anymore, what lies, unmapped, in the past that has become the history our lives make as they connect to other people. *I should let you go,* you say, when the phone rings. But you pause there in what was once the door to our house, waiting for something.

As I wait too, though there are no words to describe this sadness that hangs between us, folded and refolded as those topographical maps you used to consult when we hiked, measuring the contour lines with a thumbnail as familiar as my own, saying, *It's not far now. A few miles and we're home.*

Instinct

When I saw the way the mother moose stood for days beside her dead calf, licking at it, nuzzling the still form that had already begun to decay —its coat tattered as worm-eaten velvet—as if her presence could make it rise again, stalks of legs unfolding beneath it like lengths of burnished sapling birch, the film disappearing from its eyes as fog burns off a pond in midsummer, I understood how it was that I had waited beside you, everything I knew of devotion concentrated, each breath a slipknot of pain.

I saw that it was my task to stand guard, pawing the ground, shaking my head at intruders, impelled by the kind of crazy logic we call *constancy, or faith*, to remain close to what I'd loved, protecting it, keeping it away from the white teeth of the wolves that circled the place where you'd fallen—until I saw that it was me or you, and I left, crashing through the brush of my own life and into the clearing of who I might be without you.

Radio Love Poem

It's not true that I had nothing on. I had the radio on

—Marilyn Monroe, in *Time* magazine, 1952

The radio makes me nervous. But there was a time when I loved it, thirteen and falling asleep to the hum of my black-cased transistor, its leather handle looped securely around one wrist. Pulse beat against pulse beat, I rocked on the radio's currents, matching my blood and my moods to the waves of the music, the dee-jays' announcements and even the commercials for "Su-n-n-days at Raceway Park!"

Murray the K, with his "Swinging Soiree"; wise Roscoe; and Alison Steele/"The Night Bird" with my own name, who came on at eleven, her voice of honey filtered over gravel as deliberately sexy as the new fires catching hold in my body. I knew them all on an intimate basis. I invited them into my room with a flick of one finger, or carried them with me —voices that seduced from sixty miles away, downriver in New York City, brimming with secret knowledge about the meaning of my world.

Summer afternoons, the radio was girlfriend and boyfriend, dangling by its strap from the handlebar of my old Schwinn as I pedaled five miles out to clear, grey Lake Mamanasco, music drifting behind me like rain clouds on the verge of explosion. Baring my pale skin to the flat, white sun, I lay down, huddled alone on the striped bath towel I had imagined so Californian, suddenly over-exposed in my homemade paisley bikini and waiting, just waiting, for the boys who swam and dove like schools of bright fish oblivious to my shy signals.

I smoked crumpled Tarytons. Stared, from behind *Jane Eyre*, into the water. Pretended to be interested in the abilities of Sun-In, Coppertone, and *Ingenue* to completely transform me. Turned that transistor up extra loud. "Red Rubber Ball," one ridiculous song played again and again, satisfyingly round with the promise of the worst being over, the morning sun rising, and everything turning out happily in the end.

I didn't even like the song. But I was the ball, bouncing along like an out-of-control dinghy on the force of those airwaves, a life preserver of music keeping me afloat, while I bobbed to the raft, swimming with one arm, bearing the radio like torch or trophy above me, then rested on grey boards that smelled of algae and boat oil, before heading back to shore alone.

Radio love song. It wasn't even sound I craved, but protection against silence, the quiet places in my own head the ones I feared most because they named me as what I was, a lost station in search of an airway. The real world rushed in through a black plastic speaker, while I listened, captive to rhythms that were swirling inside me, and danced

with myself in the hallway mirror, my fingers grooved in ridges from adjusting the painted silver dial.

But someone was always watching in that room that sparked bright with the energy of random electrical charges. In the middle of it all stood a girl looking for words she could say, hidden under the music, her brain crackling into life like sheets of summer lightning, or a thunderstorm breaking, or a transmitter beginning, finally, to send out signals, a first raw poetry she recognized as her own.