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The 1997 Editors' Prize Contest Winners

Judith Westley

First Place

The Far-Away Country

Franklin County Public Hospital, Summer 1983

Before the hospital, I imagine each of us lived alone
on separate islands dashed and dotted in a black ocean.
Fists of waves cracked their white knuckles against our shores,
throwing up the heavy debris of our despair and craziness,
crowding us back from warm sands into chilly shadows of rocks

Here, we travel patiently in groups. Doctors chart our moods
and movements with checks and squiggles on their clipboards.
Every hour has a meeting place, a purpose, which we happily pursue.
We like being led after where we've drifted.

At eight-thirty, we eat breakfast. Therapy at ten,
then lunch at noon. Crafts and ping-pong start at one.
Three o'clock inaugurates two hours of free time.
We disperse to favorite spots around the ward
where we observe our private griefs and fascinations.

In the kitchen, anorexic Allison hums and sways.
She mixes batter for some English muffins.
Her tall body leans over the bowl, a mast tilted by strong winds;
The sheer sail of her blouse cups her waist with its lush billows.

Ray the addict and outdoors man shows us how to row a boat.
He squats down on the ground and rolls his sleeves.
His blue veins pulse and thicken.
His rough hands grip imaginary oars that jab the air.

I prop my feet up on the reading table, then pause to scratch
the deep cuts healing on my arm. Flipping the next page
of my magazine, I read aloud: "Bats can barely see,
but they navigate well in their world of relative dark.
Sound is both their chisel and their stone.
They treat unfamiliar distances like shapes, whose contours

they carve out by emitting special shrieks.”
Young Leona, veteran of incest and abuse,
sits with a stack of records by the stereo,
mouthing words to “Angel of the Morning.”
Her eyes are dark and fluid, two chocolate dollops just about to melt.

Dinner comes at five o’clock. We feast on chicken Parmesan
and pints of Coke until the minivan arrives at six to take us bowling.
We toss mostly gutter balls, and laugh.

We’re back by nine to change for bed. Three to a room.
Lights out at nine-fifteen. Beneath the covers, our bodies condense.
Our limbs fold and fasten snug against our torsos,
as if one could drop into sleep all at once,
a stone pitched over a bridge.

A nurse checks each room on the half-hour.
She stands in the doorway holding her flashlight.
Its single white wing unfolds across the dark to touch our faces.
Sleeping on, our bodies expand to their full length,
throwing, back the covers as swimmers throw back the water.
Our lungs release long currents of warm breath, as we dream briefly

that night lifts from us the heavy chafe of its cold frontier.