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Strand

Dixie Partridge

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Strand

What looked like muted colors of rock
 stacked in river bottoms
 is alive
 with old movement—
 stubbed slow-motion paddles
 from the stony shoulders of sea turtles
 overlapping three-deep in shallows.
 Far back, we'd thought to cross them, quick-jumping
 through the small currents
 of our wanderings down the shore.
 Now we are astonished
 before them—
 the antique finish of splendid shells,
 that moment we halted—caught
 in their slow flex inside the ripple
 of rising gulf tides.

The beached landmarks of words
 turn strange
 on our tongues, ritual bearings gone awry.
 What we cannot enter
 looms in us like stones.
 We've read of their map sense,
 compass cues scanned by some instinct
 from magnetic stripes
 on the ocean floor.
 When the heavy lids part,
 we look into deep slotted eyes
 toward the grit
 of slow enduring.

The sea swells around them
and engulfs our feet, soft shells
of our skins suddenly vulnerable.
We make our tribal way
around the ancient island,
wondering at the long years of navigation
before this return,
the feeding meadows of legend
where ships are caught and swallowed
in tangled kelp—the gulping deep blue
and salt life of the Sargasso Sea,
which has no shore for any man
to stand upon.

—Dixie Partridge

“Strand” received honorable mention in the 1995 BYU Studies Poetry Contest.