

Crescent City Beach (published *Isotope*, Spring/Summer 2005)

Joni Tevis

Over time, the dead seal turns to beach, and nobody notices. Girls jog over the bones: mosaic of glass, gray stone, windfall knocked clean of twig, root, splinter. Flesh falls away: see the ribs, gleaming, stripped of meat, pale ivory polished by grit. The skull, storm cellar, fills with stone tubers heavy and smooth, each fitted close to its neighbor, spaces packed with straw and leaf, stowed carefully by tide's rock and tamp. The empty eye socket swells with water, a tide pool divot, floored with bone, rimmed with thin smears of algae. And here, next to the skull, flipper bones arch, whole, articulate, which is how I found him to start with, though all the bones could say was *See me*. They angle from the wrist, oddly small, thin, spreading, tipped by four milky claws.

I want those claws, four oval moons thrall'd, tied to the flipper's near coast—rubbed stone, bone lozenge, tablet, tooth. If I hold them under my tongue, will they melt there? Will they help me recall what it is to cut a spiral through hard waves, tear wriggling life apart and drain it down my throat, split water wide, haw a bark into the loud wind? Oh, I want them, these silent claws, knocked, made beautiful by hard use. The jetty's living seals tumble, pillow-jostle, buck, bellow, stare at me, onyx-eyed. What do they want? True, I have much worth coveting: incisors' blunt spades, breath's twinned wrung sponge, heelbone a hammer, hair a net sieve, jaw's fierce club, cochlea steeped in raw light. Overhead, gulls: tin cut from lighter tin. Lowering sky a hammered sheet.

Dead seal, you need nothing of mine; you have nothing to warrant my keeping. Your stones are not mine to touch, though they pull me, bed of my bone, bone of my nail—pull, yes, like the old fields, south and north, where my dear ones lie, taking their rest, laid over with swansdown snow or soaked by warm rains, sealed fast from tide and storm, wrapped tight, dull glowings in that darkness.