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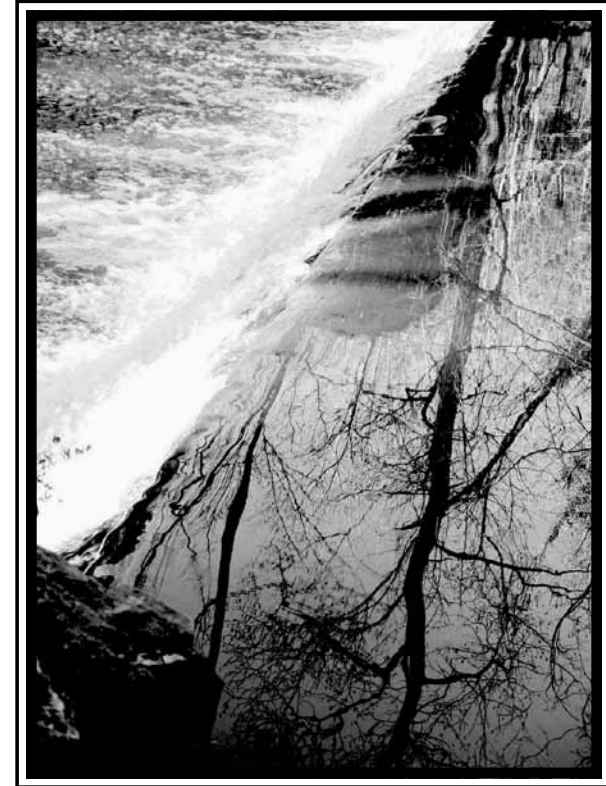
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THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

SURPRISED BY JOY



A WISING UP ANTHOLOGY

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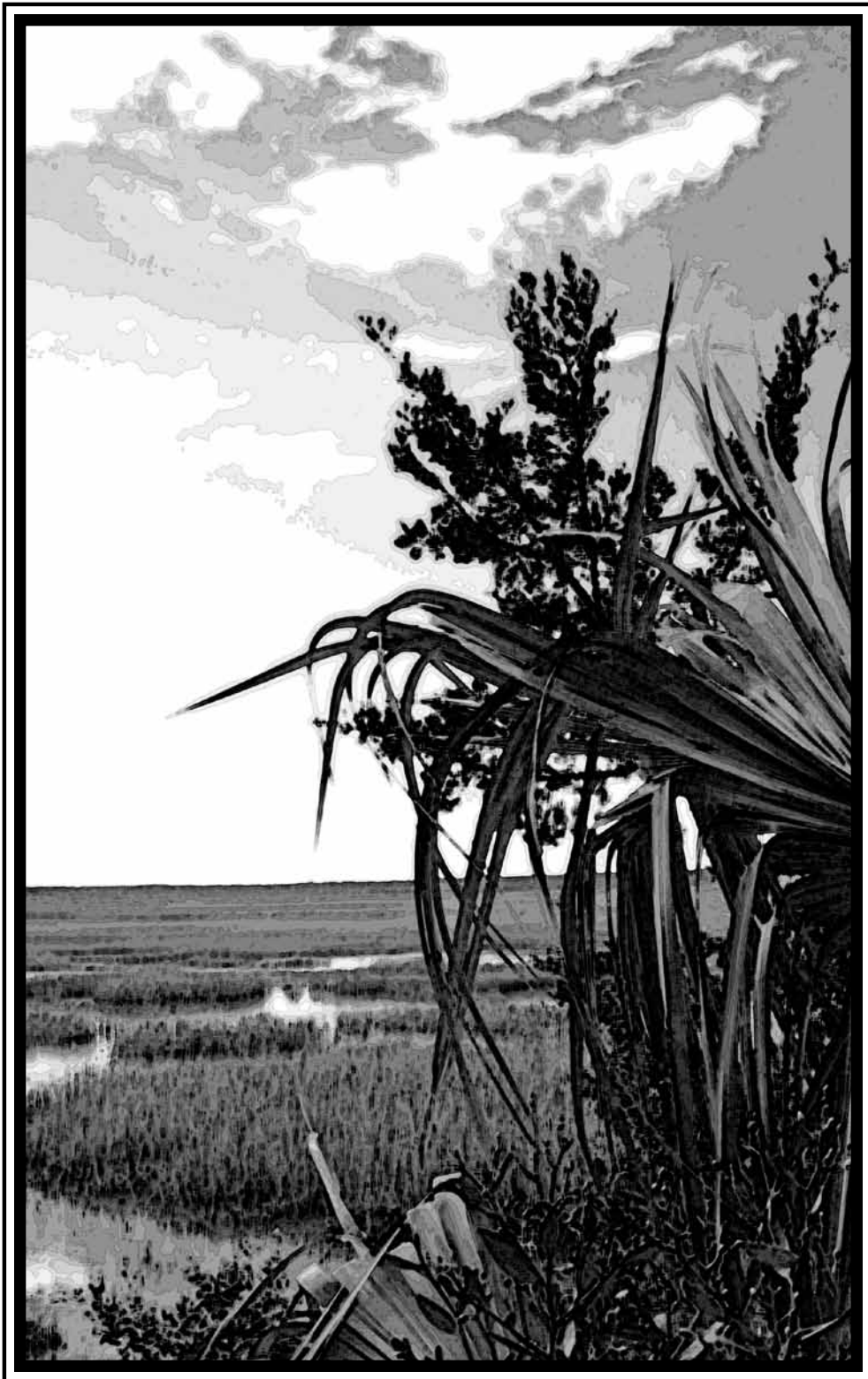
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DEDICATION

*To the memory of
Joyce Hamm Brockett
and
Dilys Bodycombe Tosteson
whose joy-filled souls shaped our lives*



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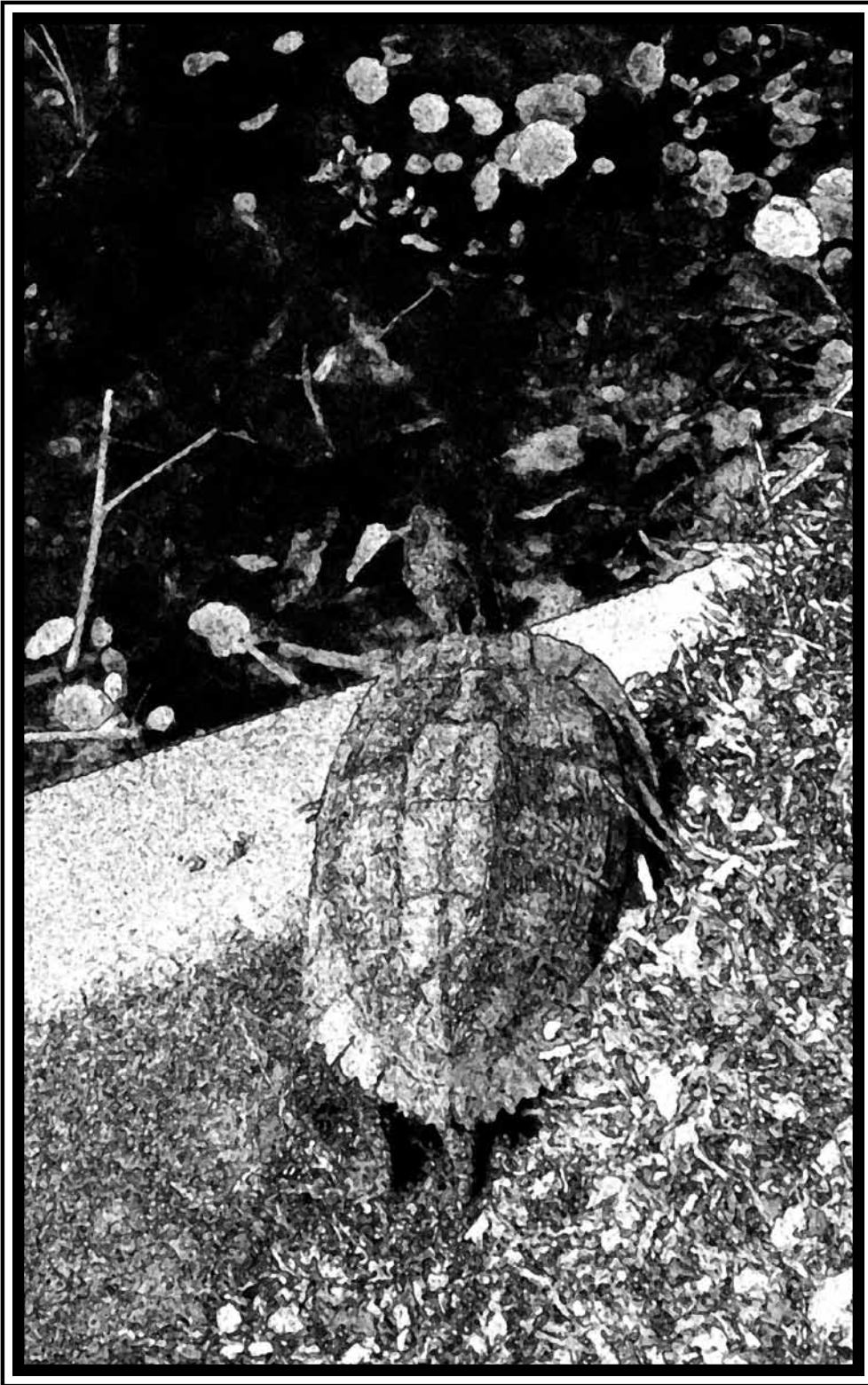
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This is the true joy of life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of Nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.

George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman*



HEATHER TOSTESON

INTRODUCTION: SURPRISED BY JOY

When we ran the call for this anthology, we posed it as both an invitation and a challenge. An invitation because joy is a deeply pleasurable state to experience and to recall, one that in times of contention and frustration and anxiety may feel inaccessible but also sorely needed. It is also a challenge to write about because one of the most striking things about positive emotions, of which joy is among the most powerful, is that they are in general non-verbal. When outraged or disappointed, we cry out, vent, erect towering arguments that we flail like blunt instruments, tell our own story incessantly. When we are very happy, we may leap with joy, yell with glee, we enact and vocalize, but we don't have a driving need to verbalize, rationalize, explain. Consequently, these positive emotions, so formative and necessary for fostering the deepest delights of life, often aren't explored as fully as they could be, their wisdom disregarded.

My own interest in joy may paradoxically come from my familiarity with depression. In his poem "Joy and Sorrow" Kahlil Gibran reminds us that these states are often twinned: "Together they come, and when one sits, alone with you at your board, remember that the other is asleep upon your bed." So often in my own life, particularly in those dark times, I would find myself—when all my intense will was exhausted, all my hopes in shreds, my good intentions erased—surprised by joy, by something rising inside me, quiet, clear, intrinsically positive, assured. I knew the indisputable reality of the pain I was in, and at the same time felt seamlessly healed. I wanted that warmth, that intrinsic certainty, with my whole being and knew it was not within my power to will or to create—but here it was, independent of anything I had done or could do, filling me with the deepest sense of well-being. At those moments, to paraphrase Robert Browning, I was sure that life meant and meant intensely and meant good and that I was an indisputable part of that meaning, that good, in ways I didn't understand fully but could not ignore

or deny. From that insight, the quiet certainty of it, the calm delight of it, other insights followed, but that moment was enough. That state was enough. I didn't have to earn it—indeed I couldn't—and it wasn't conditional on my will, my behavior, my level of faith. What I did have some control over was how fully I would open to it, become one with it, allow myself to be changed by it.

Thinking about joy these last few months, I began to make a list of moments of deep joy in my life. What I found was that as I began to recall these moments, more followed. Psychologists call this mood-contingent memory retrieval. When we're sad our lives can feel like an unbroken train of failures, disappointments, misjudgments. When we're happy, we see a path of love given and received, challenges met. This dynamic was very clear to me one autumn in my forties. I was at a difficult period in my life. My son grown, I'd moved to a new city, new state, taken a job that was a bad fit. I had rented a weekend getaway in the Georgia mountains. Often, distraught at my situation, I would hike the mountain in the nearby state park. As I struggled up the steep slope, I would be frantically thinking about what I could do to fix things, and the more frantically I thought, the more clearly I could see my whole life stretching out behind me—an unbroken series of poor choices, bad luck, inadequacy, disappointment, and my future a natural continuation of the same. There would come a point, at the top of the slope, when I would pause, breathless, totally helpless. I would be staring out blankly into the trees, catching a glimpse of the next mountain, and the next, the next, and inexplicably something came to meet me. A whole new feeling set. I began to see another path through my life, one where I had a body that could climb a hill, I had will, agency, hope, a history of resilience, love. I would scramble back down the mountain making plans, seeing options, chugging away like the little engine that could.

What originally fascinated me about the nature of this shift was how complete it was—and how binary. And how reliable it was in its own way: enough exertion, enough endorphins, and the parasympathetic system kicks in, and with it a different world view. What interests me now is the exact moment of shift, that moment when I just stopped because I had no more drive, no solutions, no escape, that moment when I was just there, alone at the top of the mountain, breathing, receiving, aware of the light on a leaf, the song of a bird, a rustle in the underbrush, the sun slipping behind a cloud or emerging from it, how in some ways that moment is very similar to

joy—and how it is not. What interests me now is the mystery of that pause, whether there is a third path we can chart through our lives that is made up of moments like that. How would that third path differ from the binary ones of sadness and happiness? What are the unique qualities of joy that would inform it?

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The first quality of joy is found in the title of this anthology. Surprise. We are always surprised by joy. It's not something we can will into existence. C. S. Lewis, making a distinction between joy and happiness, says "joy is never in our power, and pleasure often is." There is always an element of awe in joy—awe as wonder, not dread. An essential dimension of joy is that we find ourselves in relation to something greater and more profoundly positive than our conscious minds.

Another striking quality of joy is a feeling of completeness. There is an inner stillness in moments of joy, a listening inside and out that is trusting, appreciative. There is no yearning, no *saudade*, in joy. We have a sense of integrity, wholeness, repleteness. We know ourselves at that moment as enough and that awareness is wonderful, more than enough. There is an observation I encountered through the somatic movement and awareness technique of Feldenkrais that has kept coming back to me as I muse on the nature of joy: We can so organize in the pursuit of something we cannot receive it when it comes. But in the state of joy, we are organized to receive, and to receive what we may never have dared hope for: *Enough*

Another essential quality of joy is that it is meaningful. There is an intellectual dimension to joy that is tied up with the sense of wonder, an aha, just so, quality. We get something with our whole being—muscles and senses and mind; we experience a larger understanding of ourselves, our lives, our purpose, our right relation with existence. "This is the true joy of life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one," George Bernard Shaw reminds us. Joy turns our attention to the source of that larger purpose.

Joy is very private, but it attaches us. In some ways it is the opposite of ecstasy. We're not taken out of ourselves, we draw the world in and we let it draw us out too. Our awareness is kinesthetic and expansive. We're located in the moment, keenly aware, delighted. This isn't a crafted experience. We don't want to block anything out, escape anything, transcend. Wonder