

## THIS DUST OF WORDS: SYNOPSIS

Even at a very young age, Elizabeth Wiltsee was different from everyone else. Behind her wide eyes and gap-toothed smile lay a prodigious intelligence. With an IQ of 200, she taught herself to read by age four and was reading classical Greek by the time she was ten. She grew up in Manila, then Geneva and graduated with the first National Merit Scholarship from the Milton Academy, outside of Boston. At Stanford University, English Professor John Felstiner found in Elizabeth a deep thinker with the soul of a poet, possessing “an utterly uncommon voice and sensibility.”

After graduation, the world could have been Elizabeth’s oyster, but she shunned what she called the fancy life and chose to live on the fringes of society; she wanted to be completely unencumbered, as free as possible. Even the onset of mental illness in late 1985 could not deter her fiercely independent spirit.

A decade later, parishioners in a small farming community on the Central California coast would find her sleeping in the doorway of their church, homeless and apparently mute, adverse to all offers of help. Eventually she would become part of their parish, shyly attending Mass, and spending her afternoons in the public library poring over the classics, translating 8th century Chinese poetry. Despite Wiltsee's deepening mental illness and increasingly erratic behavior, parishioners at St. Patrick’s nevertheless deemed her condition worthy, not of scorn, but of compassion.

In early July 1999, Elizabeth calmly told a fellow homeless woman, “I’m going home.” She walked out of Watsonville and headed east, crossing the coastal mountain range, eventually ending up at Pacheco State Park, a wilderness area some sixty miles away. No one knew where she had gone until seven months later when her remains near the San Luis Reservoir were identified. Much like Elizabeth’s conviction that words fail to capture the essence of existence, so too are they inadequate at understanding the mystery of her life.

This Dust of Words, the title of Elizabeth’s Stanford Honors' Thesis, is both a meditation on that mystery and a story of uncommon compassion; an elegy for a life lived differently, right to the end.