AROUND IN SQUARES

By

SHARON LAREE GERALD

Bachelor of Science
University of Southern Mississippi
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University of Southern Mississippi
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Thesis Approved:

Mark Cox

Thesis Advisor

Thomas C. Collins

Dean of the Graduate College

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Introduction

In _Style and Authenticity in Postmodern Poetry_, Jonathan Holden suggests that "poets have increasingly turned to nonliterary analogues such as conversation, confession, dream, and other kinds of discourse as substitutes for the ousted 'fixed forms' (11)." Of these, he says one of the most popular as well as the most personal is the conversation poem in which, in imitation of conversation, the language is informal and familiar. While Holden's ideas are problematic in that such a wide range of contemporary poetry falls into each category, particularly "conversational," they are still helpful in offering terms through which to discuss free verse prosody.

"Conversational" can tell us something about how the form of a poem will be shaped insofar as it can tell us something about how the voice and the language will operate. But there are myriad ways in which the voice of a conversation poem might take on a shape, myriad ways in which that voice might influence the "form" of the poem, and coming to more specific terms through which to discuss the "conversational" as a form remains a problem. Holden does attempt to make his term more specific by dividing conversation poems into "narrative" and "meditative." This still leaves a great deal of room for diversity in formal elements such as line lengths, rhythms, or sonic patterns.

Nevertheless, as a style, as a school of thought in contemporary poetry, the narrative conversation poem is as close as I can come to placing the prosody of my own poems within an outside framework.

The poems in this collection are often narrative in a casual, "chatty" manner which places primary emphasis, stylistically, on the tone of voice or the attitude of presentation. They have numerous influences, but among the most lasting would have to be Philip Larkin, the first poet whose work I studied extensively as I was learning to write poems myself. Through the early influence of Larkin, I picked up an admiration for attitude, for a kind of distillation of the sense of lost illusions with the images of urban realism, as well as a general nastiness toward other people, and a genuine desire to strip everything down to a small moment in which some degree of transcendence might be suggested. I liked about Larkin's poems that the speaker often behaved irreverently toward those things he held the most nostalgia for: religion, relationships, the process of aging. I liked about them that they had <u>attitude</u>, and I wanted to be able to recreate my own <u>attitude</u> in their image, perhaps not as nastily British as Larkin's, but sassy, irreverent, cocksure, self-ironic.

While I have not maintained that desire for sassiness in every poem, I have been very concerned with the sound of the voice, the <u>personality</u> of the voice, and this I did not

learn from Larkin alone. I can point to any number of poets from the 50s and 60s who have helped define this very desire in contemporary poetry: Olson, O'Hara, Creeley, Ginsberg, etc., but I, at least initially, have been much more influenced by later poets--Jack Myers and Stephen Dunn among them, but most especially, Mark Halliday.

What I learned from Halliday was that not only is sassiness allowable as a sound for poetry, as a voice, but to successfully get away with calling so much attention the sound of someone talking, that voice must be used to control every other element of the poem--the pacing, the rhythm, the lengths of the lines, the turns in logic, the repetitions of consonants or vowels or phrases. This, to me is the essence of the narrative conversation poem. It may be lyrical or melodic, but it is first just talking. It is off-hand in its presentation, and the measure to which it grants itself a particular character trait determines the "form" the poem follows.

In many ways, the narrative conversation poem is nothing more than the current fashion. Or, if you will, a <u>re</u>curring fashion. Poetry journals and creative writing conferences are full of defenses for this very style of poem, which include reasonings such as: it is a more democratic pursuit; it is a more expansive pursuit; it helps us to express the real sounds of the real voices of our

time; it helps us to reach an audience outside our own little university circle. These descriptions of the motivations and impulses behind narrative conversation poems among contemporary poets sound suspiciously like descriptions that have come and gone throughout the history of the English tradition.

The Earl of Surrey and Sir Thomas Wyatt, in adopting iambic principles to English verse, argued for a mimesis of natural speech, which they believed involved patterns of alternating weaker and stronger stresses. Wordsworth called for an adoption of the languages really used by men, claiming, "Accordingly such a language arising out of repeated experience and regular feeling is a more permanent and a far more philosophical language than that which is frequently substituted for it by Poets" (239). In this country, Walt Whitman and William Carlos Williams continued the argument for employing the languages of the common man, turning it into an issue of expressing American voices, of adhering to democratic principles.

Likewise, the general aesthetic behind the narrative conversation poem, which is essentially romantic, is certainly nothing new. The rhetorical style (informal, familiar, conversational) and the aesthetic style (romantic, personal) simply cannot be separated. Nineteenth century romanticism called for a predominance of imagination over reason, of emotion over intellect and as such, called for

placing the individual at the center of the poem and for the use of a more personal, less poetic diction. The more romantic, more narrative strain of the contemporary conversation poem does the same thing. It places at the center of the narration an individual, a personality, who speaks directly, in a personal, casual style to the reader.

Quite a few critics, among them David Wojahn and Stanley Plumly, have attempted to define this romantic, personal, narrative version of contemporary poetry by what it is not, by contrasting it to opposing strains of more ironic, more intellectualized, more imagistic, or more meditative poetry. Plumly claims, "If there is a general difference among younger poets today it is a difference of rhetorical sources: those who write out of an emotional imperative and those who write out of an emblematic imperative" (21). Wojahn, in an essay describing a particular school of contemporary narrative poetry which focuses on memory as its motivating and shaping force, borrows Nietzschian terms to divide the memory narratives into two distinct patterns: the Dionysian, which is romantic, and the Apollonian, which is classical or anti-romantic. Holden himself, in dividing the conversation poem into the narrative and meditative, draws similar lines of distinction.

Indeed these lines can be quite easy to draw and follow in contemporary poetry. Holden offers the example of Susan

Ludvigson's "Little Women" as narrative, which includes:

> I remember standing on the sidewalk,
> hands raised to the sky,
> proclaiming _I_ would not
> be married, have children,
> live in a neighborhood
> like this. But always
> we returned
> to the little house
> behind my real one. (36)

And as a meditative conversation poem, Holden suggests Jorie Graham's "For Hope," which includes:

> Because we think,
>   watching
> the blush spot a bird
>   has just left,
> where something's missing
>   something
> must be. (41)

Just as Holden explains in his definitions of narrative versus meditative, the first poem is based on anecdote, on memory, on the poet's authority of tone, while the second poem is philosophic, speculative, based on an authority of aesthetics or imagistic analogy. While Holden's distinction between narrative and meditative poetry is about formal presentation and Wojahn's distinction between the Apollonian

and the Dionysian is about poems with similar modes of presentation written for different purposes, Wojahn's desire to categorize poems into opposing camps might also be applicable.

Wojahn essentially sees conflicting impulses between writing poems for a kind of transcendent self-knowledge or for a kind of ironic self-knowledge. On the one hand, an investigation of memory leads to a self-understanding that makes possible romantic renewal. But for the Apollonian, there is no renewal, no "recollection in tranquility." There is only the possibility of knowledge, of "memory as a burdensome experience of loss, mitigated only occasionally by the power of irony" (Wojahn 25).

I would argue, however, that there is a great deal of contemporary poetry that does not fall so neatly into either category, that it is the very combination of the Apollonian and the Dionysian in the same place that gives much contemporary narrative poetry its edge, its sense of conflict and individuality. Of course, romanticism has never been devoid of the anti-romantic in the way Wojahn defines it as relying on "the power of irony" in bringing to bear an intellectual self-knowledge which doubts the possibility for transcendence. Albert Gelpi, addressing these same tugs between the romantic and the anti-romantic in modernism, cites Eliot as claiming:

> Romanticism stands for <u>excess</u> in any direction.

> It splits up into two directions: escape from the world of fact, and devotion to brute fact. . . the two great currents of the nineteenth century--vague emotionality and the apotheosis of science (realism) alike spring from Rousseau. (Gelpi 6)

If romanticism has been made up from the outset of both this desire to escape and "devotion to brute fact," defining the boundaries between what one might term romantic or anti-romantic in contemporary poetry might be a bit tricky. However, I believe there is still a distinguishable line between them. That line would lie in the way in which the role of art itself is defined. True romanticism, while perhaps capable of the irony and skepticism of anti-romanticism, would offer art as a means through which to find meaning, renewal, or transcendence. Anti-romanticism would question the ability of art to accomplish anything so grand.

Harry R. Garvin suggests:

> In former times the role of causa sui had been played by God. Who or what could fill it in the secularized world of Coleridge's day. . . According to Coleridge, as to all European Romantics, that something is Art, the mode of communication of the imagination. (59)

The split in two directions within the same poem and the

role a poem making that split is willing to lend to art is what I am interested in pointing to as my strongest influence within contemporary poetry. Wallace Stevens described the imagination and reality as interdependent opposites. He claimed successful poetry depended on a balance between the two. In the poetry I would claim as an influence and in the poetry I have attempted to create, the emotional or the romantic and the ironic, skeptical, brute reality of anti-romanticism work as interdependent opposites. A move too far in either direction, and the poems cannot work.

Consider Robert Hass' "Meditation at Lagunitas" (see Appendix A). This poem is both meditative and narrative. It is both imagistic and conversational, both determinate and indeterminate, incorporating both elevated language and straight talk. It thinks as well as sings of emotion. And in thinking, it is well aware of both the speaker's desire and his inability to come to any real resolution for that desire. It is anti-romantic in that it focuses on loss and on an intellectual understanding of that loss. This understanding is poststructuralist in its insistence that a feeling and an experience have nothing ultimately to do with one another, that a word can only mean what we make it mean, and even then is merely "elegy to what it signifies." Yet the poem is also romantic in clinging to its desire, in drawing together the small details of memory to insist that

although no ultimate significance may come of them, "those afternoons and evenings" can still be held on to, can still be named, "such tenderness."

True, most poetry is a reaction against something and an attempt to recreate an opposing tradition. In this way, Wojahn and Plumly are merely pointing to a trend in narrative poetry to rid itself of an abstract, intellectual symbolism. Plumly argues:

> What the Symbolists left us, and leave us, is the notion of the image as an ideal, an entity self-generated, an art admitting absolutely its artifice. . . The speaking voice, as a free verse instrument, is too flawed, it would seem, to handle both itself and symbol simultaneously. (22)

Thus, we have opposing camps of poetry divided between not only romanticism or anti-romanticism, but more specifically between an emphasis on voice or an emphasis on image. Much of contemporary poetry is a reaction against modernism, against New Criticism, against imagism, and more recent poetry might be seen as a reaction against Deep Image poetry.

Philip Larkin, my early favorite, and certainly, I think, a strong precursor to the narrative conversation poem, followed Wordsworth's cue to simplify the language of poetry, to make it more like the languages of common men as

a means of railing against what he called the institutionalization of modernism. In an interview with Paris Review, Larkin says, "First and foremost, writing poems should be a pleasure. So should reading them, by God" (68). And in his introduction to All What Jazz, he asserts, "This is my essential criticism of modernism, whether perpetrated by Parker, Pound or Picasso: it helps us neither to enjoy nor endure" (297). While Larkin was not a free verse poet, in making his attacks on modernism and in calling for more common language, he also began to make that move away from symbol and toward voice as the controlling device of the poem.

Despite the reign of New Criticism in the university, American poets of the forties and fifties dealt with some of the same issues. William Carlos Williams, with Paterson, attempted to "totally remake the language, or to allow into the poem all forms of language" (Jackson 10). Richard Jackson claims: "The hope for Williams here was a poetry that was large enough to be, as Heidegger would say, a 'conversation,' for the discoveries we hope to make" (106). In addition to an emphasis on more conversational and more colloquial language, poets like Robert Lowell and Randall Jarrell began placing emphasis on character, on the personal as opposed to Eliot's call for an escape from personality, and on narrative as a means of developing character and personality in a unifying fashion.

This emphasis on the personal told through less elevated language led more and more poets toward voice and away from image. While many poets of the time were experimenting with free verse or open forms and many, like Larkin, were writing mainly traditional forms, the revolt against meter is an important aspect of the development of a more voice oriented conversational style. Poets, especially into the fifties and sixties, began to claim that the languages really used by men could only be expressed through their natural speech patterns, which no longer resembled traditional meters. With this loss of traditional meters as well as complex symbolism came a loss of traditional poetic authority, which left the speaking voice on its own to convince the reader of its authority. As Plumly explains:

> Without the self-appointed skills the formalist can display, the free verse poet is especially vulnerable to questions of credentials. The tone of his voice, as it brings together what is happening with why it is happening, as it gives thought to the emotion, as it calls more and more attention to the person behind the performance, must pass some fairly tough tests as to what is true as well as what is beautiful. (27)

The search for replacements for traditional sources of poetic authority eventually led to the conversational narrative poetry of someone like Mark Halliday, in which

voice turns into attitude, in which an exaggerated attention is placed on the character or personality of the voice, but the ideas which made Halliday's style possible really began to take shape in the fifties and sixties with the Black Mountain poets, the Beats, the New York School poets.

Charles Olson insisted in his 1950 essay, "Projective Verse," that "the poem itself must, at all points, be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge," and he attributed to Creeley and Levertov the idea that, "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT" (Allen 148). Both statements are concerned with the loss of the authority in fixed forms and the need to replace that authority with a new poetic theory. Indeed, the essay begins, "Verse now, 1950, if it is to go ahead, if it is to be of essential use, must, I take it, catch up and put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath" (Allen 147). Olson was committed to a poetics of open forms or what he called "composition by field," but recognized in that composition a need for something to distinguish itself as essential to the making of the poem, and something to distinguish the poem as essentially of use to the reader. His principles of high-energy and a heightened awareness of movement based on the syllable and the breath open up the possibilities for the attitude-charged conversation poems that come later.

Likewise, the highly-charged litanies of Allen Ginsberg

and the work of other performance poets of the sixties have paved the way, stylistically, for a tone-driven poetry of conversation. "Howl" is constructed through a series of long lines which Ginsberg claims are to be read each in a single breath, thus forcing a very fast pace reminiscent of Olson's call to "get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, the perceptions, theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen" (Allen 149). Amiri Baraka also shows influences of Olson in claiming that the form of a poem will be revealed through the process of writing it by its content, adding:

> The only "recognizable tradition" a poet need follow is himself. . . & with that, say, all those things out of tradition he can use, adapt, work over, into something for himself. To broaden his own voice with. (You have to start and finish there. . . your own voice. . . how you sound.) (Hoover 645)

These sentiments from Olson, Ginsberg, Baraka and others allow for the development of a poetry in a younger generation in which Tony Hoagland says, "speed is the distinguishing factor--that, and a certain self-presentation of the speaker, caricaturistic and frank at once, simultaneously bold and evasive" (11).

While much has been borrowed by nineties conversational

poets from the fifties and sixties, decisions shaping recent poetry cannot be understood without addressing as well how it is attempting to dismiss fifties and sixties ideas. Lowell, Ginsberg, and Olson may be applauded by the conversation poets for bringing the personal, the everyday, the conversational back to poetry, but in many ways they are seen as having gotten out of hand--or at least poets seem to have a certain fear that following in their footsteps might lead to "getting out of hand." Olson offered the idea of the breath as a measure for the poetic line, but he also belonged to a group of poets who insisted on the organic nature of form as a way in which poems are just "revealed." Poets who have been trained in process-oriented pedagogies have certainly shirked the spontaneous, instantaneous, one image leading to another implications of organic form. Also, as free verse has become more and more widespread, more and more acceptable, poets have found it important to make the legitimizing move of claiming free verse, like any verse, is hard work that requires revision after difficult revision to find its shape.

Likewise, while confessional poetry certainly gave birth to conversational poetry, few poets of the younger generation would defend the autobiography of their poems with the ardor of Robert Lowell. Many take great issue with being linked autobiographically at all to their work, and many others simply see a strict adherence to autobiography

as limiting. The move toward the conversational, toward an emphasis on voice is a move toward characterization, which brings with it implications of a level of artifice early confessional poets claimed not to use.

David Wojahn has been so concerned with more fictionalized reactions against confessionalism that in a mid-eighties essay, he asked writers to consider that the best personal poets neither write from pure autobiography nor pure dramatization, claiming:

> Their purpose is not to create roles and speak through the voices of characters far removed from their own immediate experience; their purpose instead is to don masks which bear striking similarities to their own faces, and to create characters who have significant similarities to their own personalities, but are stylized. (Person 6)

Questions of what is personal enough, what is too personal may continue to create conflicts among poets, but if poetry is a "momentary stay against confusion," the confusions poets face in having their work read and recognized remain something of the same. The narrative conversation poets of the nineties are, for the most part, academic poets, who do not want to admit to having lost a pleasure-seeking audience in exchange for as Larkin described them, "the dutiful mob that sign on every

September" (82). The quest for a popular audience for poetry has been such a concern that sixties style performance poetry is enjoying a rebirth. Coffee shops, cafes, even laundromats across the country are hosting open poetry readings to the extent that they have caught the attention of a new PBS series. In the February 3-9, 1996 issue of TV Guide, Amiri Baraka explains this resurgence of at least some popular interest in poetry with:

> Book-bound, academic poetry fell out of fashion because it has nothing people can relate to. Endless reflections on the landscape? Sure that's not popular, because it doesn't reflect people's lives. I think any poetry that reflects people's lives in some kind of real way, without 7,000 footnotes in Latin and Greek, is bound to be popular. (32)

If only through concerns of audience, nineties free verse university recognized poets, for the most part, remain loyal romantics. Yet they are unavoidably the products of a century of institutionalized poetry. They are academics. Poets may have ideals of speaking in the languages of real men, but the real men, women and teenagers in a technological age are fairly savvy media-educated folk who enjoy a certain healthy skepticism. And poets themselves are not only university educated. They are often university employed. They have read Freud and Nietzsche. They have

read Derrida and Foucault. They have read Freud again with an understanding of feminism.

What writers of contemporary personal narrative lyrics have taken from Freud, according to Alan Williamson, is an expansion of the "very concept of subjective significance . . . as the dream life and the lived life, the monumental and the trivial, reveal their hidden interfaces." Williamson adds, "It becomes impossible to trace a moment of inner experience back through all the layers of the remembered, the imagined, and even the forgotten past," but the ego allows for a reconciliation of "this pessimism about consciousness with the manifest complexity of personality" (3).

The expansion of "subjective significance" through a concentration on the "complexity of personality" that Williamson describes is exactly the kind of thinking that has led to the poems David Wojahn identifies as adopting memory as the very vehicle for poetry. In a memory narrative, Wojahn explains, time is an essential element. A constant attempt is made to locate the self in time and the complexity of the circular, interconnectedness of all memory, across great spans of linear time or across apparently disconnected subject matters, is what leads to an understanding of personality. This understanding of personality is what establishes the focus and purpose of the narrative. As Wojahn admits, this is quite a mythic

endeavor. In the way Whitman claimed to contain multitudes, this kind of memory narrativist would claim to contain multitudinous selves, multitudinous relationships to experience and time in one unified personality.

In this regard, Wojahn's distinctions between a Dionysian and an Apollonian strain in contemporary narrative poetry is useful. Most of the poetry I have been identifying my own with is more Dionysian than Apollonian. Conversation poems, by concentrating on character, try to identify some redemptive element of that character. My poems, in fact, are often quite romantic. However, I think it is important to recognize that even the romantics among us are not immune to twentieth century skepticism.

The problem with borrowing from earlier romanticism the mythic, truth-seeking self who, by way of Freud, is brought to an awareness of disparate levels of consciousness and memory is that it requires an assertion of poetic authority that is quite difficult to maintain in the face of post-structuralist and post-modernist thinking. Poets have learned from Derrida and from Saussure before him that while they may be able to speak to a desire for romantic unity and transcendence through images drawn from memory, the meanings they ascribe to those images are quite arbitrary.

Ihab Hassan defines postmodernism as an age of indeterminacy. Though, as Hassan points out, coming to a definition of postmodernism is very tricky, because it is

used by some to indicate a historical period or time-frame, by others to indicate a particular way of thinking or movement within the arts and by still others to mean simply the avante-garde within a particular time-frame. If used to define a literary movement, certainly, the nineties poets of the conversational narrative style are not attempting postmodernism. They are less theory oriented, less deconstructionist, less on the side of discontinuity than perhaps a poet like John Ashbery. That is not to say, however, that they are unaffected by postmodernism.

Hassan claims one aspect of postmodernism is a concentration on a play of ideas rather than an authoritarian purpose. Barbara Johnson says the same thing of decontructionism, from which postmodernist writers borrow many of their ideas. "If anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading," she claims, "it is not meaning but the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another" (xiv). Thus, what is destroyed for the poet engaged in deconstructionist thinking is not the possibility of romanticism itself, but the possibility of the <u>unequivocal domination</u> of the romantic over the anti-romantic. Rather, a play between the two would be introduced.

Hassan suggests:

> The Apollonian view, rangy and abstract, discerns only historical conjunctions; the Dionysian

> feeling, sensuous though nearly purblind, touches only the disjunctive moment. Thus, postmodernism, by invoking two divinities at once, engages a double view. Sameness and difference, unity and rupture, filiation and revolt, all must be honored if we are to attend a history. (88)

Another consideration in the effects of poststructuralist thinking played against a tendency toward romanticism for poets is that this thinking involves feminism, marxism, and multicultural concerns. Romantic individualism demands a kind of authoritarianism, a kind of arrogance, that those interested in gender, race, culture, or class issues would deny. Jan Montefiore challenges the usefulness of romanticism for feminist poets:

> The Romantic discourse of poetry. . . is less likely to strike feminist readers as determining the ways in which women write. . . than as constituting major problems for women poets generally. (10)

These problems, she says, begin with definitions of the poet as "a man speaking to men," which remain unaware of their exclusion of women. Terminology, however, is merely a surface problem, indicative of the deeper issue of the claim to romantic transcendence or "unity" as excluding the possibility for diverse experience. In feminism, Montefiore

espouses, the poet as "man speaking to men," which might become a man speaking on behalf of men, is transformed into "a poetry of 'women speaking to each other'" (11).

While there are certainly feminist poets who write romanctic poems, and narrative conversation poems that are romantic without traces of the anti-romantic, I am attempting to describe a trend in contemporary poetry that I see my own poems falling into or following.

In the personality-paced poems of Mark Halliday and others, issues of authoritarianism are avoided to a degree by their off-hand self-questioning. Often, the voice is exaggerated. If it is romantically arrogant, it becomes over-confident, so as to emphasize its self-consciousness, so as to admit its own role-playing.

Tony Hoagland explains:

> Clearly, one of the pleasures of such poetry is its anti-authoritarian attitude. Its position towards "knowledge" and cultural possessiveness is entirely different from the traditional one. Compare such a poem with a work by Yeats. Where a poem by Yeats engages character with the world, and struggles to put the latter in order by application of the former, a fast-talking poem is not in fact aimed at decision making, at arrival or conclusiveness. How, after all, can a poetry which believes the world is lawless, and that

> good behavior is next to impossible, believe in poet as legislator? (12)

Many of these issues are addressed in Halliday's "Seventh Avenue" (see Appendix B). This poem is full of attitude, full of a kind of cockiness that makes it both a know-it-all and self-consciously, self-questioningly humble. It expresses anti-authoritarian impulses and it explains exactly why it should express those impulses, making the same arguments feminists have made against the romantic self, "so great and golden inside." It uses language that is just as casual and just as cocky as the idea it wants to express, and it uses the measure of its own attitude to set the pace for the structure of the poem. Despite all of its attitude, though, despite its suggestion that the romantic self is a bunch of nonsense and it is not going to build itself up like that when there is so much aching going on up and down the avenue, it cannot resist romanticizing.

The poem implies that the self not only desires to be great and golden inside and to have means through which to share that goldenness with others, but that the desire in itself might in some small way make these things possible. Small ways, though, are the key to the thinking about romanticism in this poem. It does not offer any sweeping answers, though the speaker does say he wants "a poem long as Seventh Avenue." He also asks, "Who's Wordsworth for any extended period on Seventh Avenue?" The voice is too full

of cockiness, too full of disbelief, too aware of all the injustices of the neighborhood to seriously champion a big, romantic poem as an answer. But it remains romantic in its insistence that something can come of just sitting down to think about what it feels like to want.

All of these issues I have identified as contributing to the development of the conversation poem--attempts to recreate the language of common speech; attempts to balance the romantic with the anti-romantic; and attempts to come to terms with the extent to which a personal poem should be true to life or autobiographical--I see as inseparable elements in my efforts to shape individual poems. I want my poems to be accessible. I want them to be unpretentious in a way that refuses to offer any final answers, yet constantly considers possibilities. I want them to be in the voice of someone who is just a person talking to other people, yet someone who always has something nagging at her, something she'd like the reader to take a moment to help her think through. I want them to be personal, to explore individual human emotions and motivations, to explore them in a way that either casts no judgement or champions the underdog, yet I don't believe my poems should try to offer psychological healing to anyone, least of all myself.

I do not think of my poems as autobiographical. Though I often blatantly steal details from my own life, I am not

at all committed to keeping those details true to life. Most often, my poems are a synthesis of my own experiences and my observations of other people. Quite often the poems have nothing at all to do with my own experience. They are simply my attempt at imagining myself or characters in certain situations.

I feel my stance on the autobiographical is important to note, because it influences or is influenced by so many other elements of the poem. My poems are very personal and very frequently shaped around a first person "self," because I do believe, as Amiri Baraka has claimed, that poetry should tell us something about the way we live our lives. The romantic impulse that leads people to seek renewal or beauty or truth gives us cause to have poetry in the first place. Like so many poets of the past fifty years, I make an especial effort to be personal and to be plain spoken in my poetry so as to avoid the limitations of the overly "institutional" sounding poetry that the impersonal New Critics have left us.

However, I do not want to align myself with confessional poets either. And I know that I am not alone in that desire, with scores of poets now emphasizing characterization rather than confession. Not only is the confessional in its strict autobiographical sense limiting, but it is also self-destructive for the poet. Confessional poetry, in mythologizing the self, in aggrandizing the

feelings and inner desires of the self, is not conducive to psychological stability. It has been offered to us by the likes of Robert Lowell, a manic depressive, in and out of institutions most of his life; Sylvia Plath, chronically depressed and the victim of suicide; John Berryman, an alcoholic and another suicide victim.

While confessional poetry is certainly possible without manic depression, the conversation poets, I believe, see in their inheritance from confessional poetry the risk of self-pity. The conversation poem may not always be all that far removed from a confessional poem. Conversational poetry is essentially an outgrowth of or latter stage of confessionalism. One might just as easily call it confessional and quibble with defining the confessional to include possibilities for the emphasis on voice and characterization that is found in the conversation poem. The term has come into play, however, because a fairly large number of poets have begun to write a kind of poetry which is personal, which does place a "self" at the center of the poem, but insists on a certain distance between that self and the poet. Conversational poems are often self-conscious of their own fictionalization, and the term itself asks for a slightly stronger case for characterization than the term confessional has in the past been used to imply.

Confessional poetry has that baggage of originating from a group of poets suffering with severe depression. The

idea of the depressed poet is a cliche among both academic poets and public perception of poets. I have to insist, though, that depression is not a prerequisite for creativity.

Conversational poetry, with its emphasis on the style of presentation rather than any romantic mythologizing of an emotion, offers an alternative to confessional poetry in which poets can address the personal, address emotional, human motivations and experiences, while still affecting emotional stability, both for the poem and for themselves.

This veering away from personal confession as a means of establishing equilibrium has close ties to the other key aspects of the kind of conversational poem I have included in this collection. The desire to balance the Dionysian with the Apollonian stems from much the same issues. And the method of presentation, in an off-hand manner emphasizing personality traits, lends itself to a suggestion of play, of role-playing as opposed to confessing.

"Around in Squares," the title piece, plays with most of these concerns. The poem is in third person, not for reasons of establishing emotional distance. In a style that wants to come across as attitudinal, first person is often the easiest choice for establishing tone, but in this poem, there is a slightly fragmented feel to the narration. Several leaps are made in subject matter, across quite a bit of time and space, and in a relatively short poem. For this

reason, I thought it would be easier to follow in third person in which the speaking voice is more distant from the central character. The woman considering her name and her heritage in this poem does not have to make all of the connections on her own if there is the suggestion of a limited omniscient narrator speaking for her. Still, an attempt is made at establishing attitude by opening with her decision to care nothing for Ireland, while at the same time adding a "Fitz" to her name to make it sound more Irish than it already does.

This poem has loyalties to both the Dionysian and the Apollonian. It is indeterminate and anti-romantic in questioning the possibility of coming to terms with any real understanding of the truth in family stories, in suggesting there are no real connections from generation to generation other than those the central character chooses to create for herself. Yet the poem remains determinedly romantic in holding on to the idea that the story itself is significant, that despite an inability to establish any real truth, the belief in the story of a past has the capacity to reassure or even renew.

The mother in this poem understands the artificiality of claiming a heritage, especially the kind of heritage that brings with it identities of mythic proportions. To be Irish or to be Choctaw can mean little to an American raised in neither culture. Despite her understanding, though, she

is drawn to considering the stories, to wondering if there is some inherent part of her that is the product of an Irish grandfather and a Choctaw grandmother. She also understands that her daughter has the same questions of heritage and that these questions will help shape the girl's sense of self-perception.

"French Roast" attempts similar dichotomies. It resists romanticizing the relationship, identifying a sense of disconnectedness and suggesting that what the couple shares might not be called "love" in the way that a crush might feel like love. But the crushes the man feels for other women are brushed off as mere fantasy, and the poem ultimately does romanticize the sheer routine of togetherness, despite the fact that this couple constantly risks a "capsize into a crooked blur of appliances."

These same lines of thinking crop up in many other poems in the collection, among them, "Centerpiece" and "Finding Shape," but perhaps the most "Hallidayesque" poem, in which everything else takes a back seat to the sheer attitude of the voice is "Particularities." This poem is in second person and very deliberately calls attention to that decision by opening with an invitation to the reader to role-play the part of the viewpoint character as the story unfolds: "Assume you're a woman./And you have friends who are women./And all of these women have constant opinions concerning men." These first lines not only serve to

establish a tone of voice and the idea that personality itself will have something to do with the content of the poem, but they also suggest a pacing the rest of the poem will need to follow in order to organize itself as a poem. It is an energetic tone, therefore an energetic pace, but it is not too fast.

This voice wants to take some time to make its way through the story, to make logical moves back and forth across the idea of the poem without losing the reader. Otherwise, the opening lines of an energetic poem with a sassy spirit might read, "Assume you're a woman with women friends who have constant opinions concerning men." The sentiment would be the same, but the fast pace would require a faster pace throughout, which would make the coyness of this voice difficult to maintain. In this way, if one wants to make a claim that the conversational is in fact a form, the character, the personality of the speaking voice has everything to do with the form the poem takes.

I am not certain I am ready to make such a claim, because form to me means something repeatable, something more specific than the tone and style that a grouping of poems might have in common. Still, as a way of describing the method behind my poems, I am more than ready to label them conversational. They are narrative. They are casual. They are romantic, but not fooled by their own romanticism. And they are aware of presenting themselves as

conversational in a way that makes efforts to distinguish itself from confessional. As I see it, all of these elements associate my poems with a current school of poetry that emphasizes an exploration of character traits through an off-hand, chatty style, a school that, for want of any better terms, might be called the conversational.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A--Robert Hass' "Meditation at Lagunitas"

All the new thinking is about loss.
In this it resembles all the old thinking.
The idea, for example, that each particular erases
the luminous clarity of a general idea. That the clown-
faced woodpecker probing the dead sculpted trunk
of that black birch is, by his presence,
some tragic falling off from a first world
of undivided light. Or the other notion that,
because there is in this world no one thing
to which the bramble of <u>blackberry</u> corresponds,
a word is elegy to what it signifies.
We talked about it last light and in the voice
of my friend, there was a thin wire of grief, a tone
almost querulous. After a while I understood that,
talking this way, everything dissolves: <u>justice</u>,
<u>pine</u>, <u>hair</u>, <u>woman</u>, <u>you</u> and <u>I</u>. There was a woman
I made love to and I remembered how, holding
her small shoulders in my hands sometimes,
I felt a violent wonder at her presence
like a thirst for salt, for my childhood river
with its island willows, silly music from the pleasure boat,
muddy places where we caught the little orange-silver fish
called <u>pumpkinseed</u>. It hardly had to do with her.

Longing, we say, because desire is full
of endless distances. I must have been the same to her.
But I remember so much, the way her hands dismantled bread,
the thing her father said that hurt her, what
she dreamed. There are moments when the body is as numinous
as words, days that are the good flesh continuing.
Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings,
saying _blackberry_, _blackberry_, _blackberry_.

Appendix B--Mark Halliday's "Seventh Avenue"

Late Tuesday afternoon the romantic self weaves
up Seventh Avenue amid too many lookers, too many
feelers: romance hates democracy;

how can _you_ be so great and golden inside
if your trunk is shouldered among other trunks
block after block, block after block--

you can't help glimpsing an otherness in others
that is not just surface: they ache,
their aches ache away north and south all Tuesday

in murmurous torsos like yours. . .
What apprehension blossoms even now in Manuel
shifting steaks at the ten-foot grill of Charley O's

beneath the towering chef's hat they make him wear?
When I was twenty I'd have written
that he was only thinking of Cadillacs and sex;

now I'm afraid he's just as worried as I am
about love vs. lesser things and the point of it all.
Manuel, stay there at the sizzling grill till midnight

and then just drink or sleep, man,
don't write poems--
do me that favor. It's loud enough already

out here on Seventh Avenue with that cat's boombox
and these three giggle girls being Madonna together
and that guy hawking wind-up titans wielding laser lances.

Who's Wordsworth for any extended period on Seventh Avenue?
In this predusk traffic you catch the hint
that Manuel and thou if seers are seers only

for seconds--now the steak, taxi, buttocks, headline
and wallet resume their charismatic claim to be what counts.
Soul on Seventh is a sometime on-off quick-flip thing. . .

What I want is a poem long as Seventh Avenue
to sprinkle gold on every oppressed minority,
every young woman's subtly female hips,
every sad and suspicious American face
and the quiddity of every mud-tracked pizza shop;
proving, block after block, stanza by stanza
that I'm not just one skinny nervous pedestrian
but the one who matters because he sees and says.
I want that. The Avenue grins and says
"You want that? How does it feel to want?"

Section I

LAYOVERS

Centerpiece

Rounding the corner
between the hallway and kitchen,
I snap out of myself,
surprised to notice
the chipped nail polish,
dirty Nikes, chicken pox scars
that all add up to
someone I remember being
two, three, even ten
minutes earlier.

We think in three second increments.
My friend who told me this
says it makes a good case
for na-na na-na boo-boo
as the natural rhythm of ideas.

But if coherence is as easy
as tapping into
the metronome precision
of lingering playground chants,
nobody's let my ideas
in on it.

I use a lot of 'uhs,'
don't always make connections
from phrase to phrase
to wondering what I might have
meant to say.

So when this same friend
claimed he could pinpoint exactly
his first memory--peeing
in his mom's kitchen
with her screaming
like she continued to do
for years--I couldn't
even be certain
of a first memory
for the day.

But I need stories too,
a past to share while
shredding lettuce for the salad
or watering plants
I've almost let die.

I want a memory that tells
as much about how to read myself
as a man who needs
to spend time relaxing
in the kitchen everyday,
knowing he isn't likely
to pee on the floor,
no one is likely to yell.

Maybe I fell off the pony,
my dog ate the baby squirrel
I'd saved. Maybe
I got scared somewhere
between my house and the street
trying to run away,
or my father teared up
when he told me
he would always keep me
and my old stuffed toys around.

Almost anything could be made
into an excuse for neediness,
for feeling out of place
away from the squirrels,
for only believing
a few words at a time.

Slide Show

You know you've found what you came for
when each step, each unwinding
of routine, winding up of
travel weary worries takes you further
through the crests and bridges and displays
of green against brown
against yellow against water
that look exactly like the brochure
you've poured over for months.

You're shocked by the likeness,
how perfectly the sun begins to set on cue
in imitation of the snapshots
you've sorted through on Saturdays,
the ones that make you gasp in wonder.

The trails of neatly clipped nature
remind you of the red lights
that roll up and down
on your exercise machine, and your child,
seeing patches of snow for the first time,
says they look like the sugar
he dumps too heavily into his cereal.

You feel good. The mountain
resembles a mountain. You begin
to act like yourself and the map
seems to work as a town appears
to mark the place of a dot.

You find a lake and it's as pretty
as a postcard, with fishy smells
and ripples of white across
your blue fingertips that make you think,
yes, _yes_ that's what I want
framed above my bed.

The Perfect Match

She doesn't recognize me,
but I know what's up
the moment I glimpse her
in line at the coffee bar--
confident, smiling,
nose slightly straighter than mine,
cheeks slightly thinner,
eyebrows arched perfectly
in a way that has never required plucking.

I've no doubt she's the one--
mistaken for me at birth,
taken home to parents
who would have known
how to talk to me
but were thrilled to have her.

She's the one who would have
laughed off my sister's stories,
never bothered by the idea
of two brown haired girls
in the hospital nursery at the same time,
no one certain which was which,
but the prettier going to the people with money.

She would have stood up for herself,
would have never crawled into the closet
for fear of a man with an ax,
said by older cousins
to be out for revenge
on children who had been known
to think him weird, to run hard
with fear past his house.

She would have held her own
in my family, fit right in
as "most beautiful,"
"most popular," not the
least bit tone deaf.

She's the one all right,
but as she pays for her espresso,
casually waiving away the change,
I don't even manage a shy "hello,"
but leave her to continue
her obviously successful,
contented life as everything
I adoringly despise.

Withdrawals

The newspaper column says,
"Think yourself thin."
Instead of portion-sizing,
calorie-counting, metabolism-dodging diets,
get a therapist. Break those
obsessions with food.
Have all the cookie dough ice cream you want,
as long as it no longer represents
something lacking in your childhood,
something that can never be filled.

It reminds me of the years
tomato soup made me ill
after I was eating it
when my brother called with,
"There's been an accident.
Tony is dead." And how it still
makes me ill to think "Tony is dead,"
to think of soup and death
in the same sentence.

How could I have eaten at all?
Perhaps my subconscious
thought--Ruffles.
They're OK.
No one died during a bag
of sour cream chips.

Or sandwiches. They would have
reminded me of better things--
lunch outside behind the school,
afternoons before my parents came home
when Tony would say,
"Will you fix me a sandwich?"
and make it come out as,
"Can we have sex?"

How could Weight Watchers
compete with sex?
They recommend tiny bits of food
like the cafeteria leftovers
wrapped in paper napkins or foil
my friends brought
to my dorm room after the funeral,
saying, "Just take a bite.
You have to get through this."

But diets can't offer any more
than my friends could
to make up for what's lacking,
to explain to the part of me
that can still, years later,
in small moments,
recapture the despair
of, "Tony is dead,"
that sandy-haired jr. high dance partners,
senior summer party buddies
almost never carry over,
but exist somewhere, back there,
in the past,
where they don't need
to be replaced.

Layover

In the airport, after several
wearying mechanical delays,
after all the gift shop
and ice cream counter options
have been used up

and there is nothing left
but to fidget uncomfortably
near the gate

a woman says to her co-worker,
her companion for the flight,
that she has just remembered
being abused as a child,
and I think, what an odd thing
to "just remember,"

but I know suddenly what she means,
how it would have felt
to have an uncle press a small body
against a bed and say things
to frighten her,

how his breath was so hot
on her face and she was scared
someone would find her like that,

how there was always someone,
a whole family, close by,
in the kitchen or around the fire,
and he always pushed against her

until she thought she would smush flat
like the boy in her school reader
who wanted to mail himself to a friend,

and she could never say
she didn't want to go to that house,
didn't want to play in the back room
with its smell of never being opened
and the few toys that were no fun anyway,
because you do what you're told
and Grandmother gets upset so easily.

But there's no reason,
the three of us consider,
to believe this has happened,
to trust a memory
that comes out of nowhere

to make her worry
that the slight bruise from the playground
on her daughter's arm
means something unthinkable has happened,

to make her want to rush
to doctors and counselors at the thought
of how the husband she divorced,
the second husband she divorced
might have been physical threats.

There's no reason she should
not be able to relax,
certain her girl is safe
in the company of children,
playing ball games,
openly, healthily,

no reason when she goes away
on brief trips for her job,
she should not trust
things to go well at her sister's.

She understands all this, she says,
thinks how silly she is being
when it takes concentration to shove
the thoughts from her head,

but then we all know,
as we prepare to board the plane,
that something must have gone wrong somewhere
to give us such fear.

Tapestry

You do not know
what the world comes to
for a fifteen-year-old
to steal cars. But as you
listen to your co-worker speak,
thinking, "How dare he. . .
How dare he. . ."
you wonder how your daughter feels
about your move away from her
for work--if she has a sense
of the relief you felt
in giving up, in letting
the responsibility for her slip
for a time to her grandparents.

The man who sits near you,
who offhandedly admits,
"Oh, well, I've never
had a problem with that,"
says there is no excuse
for a sad teenager.
The world is their oyster.
They should be taught--
take control, take control.

But you know enough
of your girl to understand
she is desperate
for someone to prove
they have done good for her
at a time that already
cannot be made up.

You wanted to do good then,
when you were a kid
who did not know how to feel
about the whimpers
she would make in her
wind-up swing,
did not know if you should
wind her up more,
crank the stereo to a beat
that might blend
with the click, click,
swoosh of her movements,
or if she needed something
you did not have the energy
to provide--

to be held more and more
and more perhaps,
to be constantly assured
of dry clothes, warmth,
a kind voice singing
without the help
of a D.J.

You had not considered
the care of an infant
would require such persistence--
that you would not know
what to do
through the puking,
the rashes, the sleeplessness,
would barely remember
what you had been told
about bottles, baths,
burping.

You had not considered
that you would need help,
that motherhood might not
come naturally
or that when you
did everything you could,
when you rocked,
traced a knuckle
down her tiny cheek,
hummed what you remembered
of childhood,

when you paced back and forth,
gently swayed to settle her nerves,
when you dressed her up
and cleaned the apartment
for the company of friends,
you would still feel lonely.
You would still start to shake
at the suspicion
of a small murmur from her.

You do not know
what she could be thinking,
but you wonder
if she has a sense of the times
you left her to cry
for hours, as you
curled up on the floor
next to her swing
imagining silence.

You cannot guess
what will become of her,
but you wonder
what your co-worker would say
if he could feel
the sense she must have had
of being unable to help
even when she gurgled
and smiled and tried so hard
to love you back
better than
you were loving her.

Antagonizing a Deacon's Kid

He knew he was not supposed
to get angry, understood
thoroughly the danger
of 'S' words--
smart, stupid--both
so unwelcome in God's house.

But he could not believe
what he heard. Often,
there was trouble holding back
against the chubby girl
who went to private school,
but she would fade to nothing
in his memory
except this one claim--

one that years later
would have him pausing to say,
"I am not making this up,"
before explaining the trouble
he found himself in
for raising his voice,
for actually opening
his preacher's kid mouth
and saying, "What a dumb idea."

The problem was Sandra,
who lived in a big brick house,
who let it slip
that her parents said
black people come from monkeys
and white people come
from Adam and Eve.

He wanted to see
her smirky lips quiver as he explained
how ridiculous anyone who knew,
anyone from the outside
would believe her to be.

But it would take too much
to make her change,
not much at all
to make her squirm,
so he stuck to calling
her names--bigot, liar,
nincompoop.

Even waiting in the Sunday School wing
for parents to finish
a business meeting,
a public school kid
could only take so much
before making his case
for logic.

"I believe your poofy blonde bangs
and pale hairy legs
look like a monkey's now,"
he said. "All people
come from the same place,
but you are so slow
to get here."

He was twelve and had long since
made his way through
the _World Book_.
At home, his notebooks
were filled with science,
the parts he might need
to build a stereo,
secretive sketches
of naked women.

There was no need, no excuse,
for making it personal,
for bringing up the truth
of who she was, for claiming,

"You'll never find a good job
if you can't learn
to get along with others."

No need to bring up
the bad behavior
of _people like her_.
No reason to ask why none
of the city's Little League teams
included black children
when he had seen them playing,
out of season.

It was unforgivable of him
to say, actually open
his preacher's kid mouth
and say, "None of you
are Christians.
That's not what a Christian is."

Red Carpet City

"a plague-town closing its gates,
trying to cure itself with poisons"

--Adrienne Rich

What I remember is the smell
of ante-bellum slums mixed with
cheap high school beer and vodka,

the feel of war-dead lists
beneath my fingers
as I discovered an idea of decadence
in sneaking through the park at night,

wondering if the friends
I was with understood
that even on the days when Vicksburg
was just a place where people lived--
where they smoked in secret,
daydreamed through algebra, teased
arrangements to go out on Friday--

nothing could happen separately
from residual resentments,
the commodity of a town encircled and starved,
surviving through re-enactments.

We liked to talk about the river,
fascinated with its warning signs,
its history of sucking in driftwood
and rickety little Huck Finn rafts
people thought would work,

assuring ourselves we'd never
have to make the choice
of leaving town for college
if our neighborhood caught
a flood current to the Gulf,

if teachers had not overestimated
Vicksburg's importance to Russia.

And later, as we counted up our friends
who'd driven drunk in front of drunks,

thinking we'd be next,
blaming it all somehow on stories,
the way every effort to be included
was about death, war, defeat,
the daughters of Daughters
of the Confederacy
intent on continuing
a pageant of what was suffered,

we would dwell so long on these things,
walk drunk right up to the water
with talk of drownings,

drive too fast around
the narrow lanes surrounding monuments,

trying a little, perhaps,
to fulfill those kindergarten promises
of dying young.

For an Audience of Rugs

My daughter walks into
the kitchen boldly,
a room constant diets
encourage her to distrust.

With countertop hurting my knees
as I search high shelves
for light bulbs,

she knows not to hesitate,
let me hear her question--
"Can I have a beer?"--as one
that should be turned down.

She's already pulled the tab
when I slide to the floor
feeling out of place
with honesty,

knowing it's my job to say something.
"Be careful," maybe,
or "Have you noticed, Hon, how
our family is so addicted--
abstinence, alcoholism,
abstinence, alcoholism.
It's a choice you don't
have to make."

I remember how nervous I was
of holding her, at first,
how I looked so closely
for signs of myself
and found them eventually
in long, crooked toes

and the way she locks herself
into the pink wallpapered bedroom
she has never been little girl enough
to appreciate.

She dances across
the carpeted living room,
interweaves steps she learned
from a ballet-tap-jazz teacher
five shoe sizes back
with interpretations
of MTV,

shuffles easily across the hallway
onto the hard wood floor
of her room.
Despite a lack of interest
or talent for lessons,
this helps her think,

helps her cherish
time alone
where she is free
to brood over expectations,
beliefs, the inevitable
confusions of family.

She shuts the door
before I make up my mind
to say nothing,
as I stand helpless,
wanting badly for her
to get away with confidence,
with attempts at honesty,
wanting badly for her
to get away.

Section II

THE STORY GOES

Body Habits

Oprah is occupied today with a string of women
who've recorded their husbands snores,
who've taken the last they can take
of earplugs, earphones, heads tucked under pillows
before early morning moves to the couch.
Lacking recognition, support,
understanding of their true heroics,
they've put up with all
they could reasonably endure.
So they've set the cassettes,
planned ahead for the cameras,
the heat of the lights,
as if they will finally resolve something important,

as if those recorded could ever sound familiar to themselves
and everyone should catch their bodies
at the things they do on their own.
These women want responsibility made clear,
established through the whole of a marriage, job,
habit of sitting daily at the same table
where a family grimaces over
the way the toddler smacks his cereal loudly,
mouth opening wide with each bite,
the Dad makes tiny burps between gulps of coffee,
and the Mom nervously twists crumbs
from her toast into her hair.

On stage, is a woman who sleeps in a near fetal arch,
butt stretched so far across the bed
there is no room for anyone's habits
to blend into her turns and tosses.
Her husband jokes that it is impossible
to stay in the same building when she sleeps,
let alone the same mattress.

She is told constantly *scoot over*, *scoot over*,
keep the covers straight, as if she could summon
more command in dreams than awake,
than she ever did as a child
when people said *look at me*, *look at me*
while she memorized patterns of ceilings--
how gold flecks and brown water spots
blurred into circular sorry resentments
as her knuckles pressed painfully together,
her chin quivered softly through the revelation
of some vague incomprehensible guilt
over hurting her brother,
letting too much homework slip by.

On stage, is another woman who would understand,
who would like to make a place for herself
and stay in it, would like to
settle spoon fashion through the night
with no restless puttering from room to room,
but the thought of learning how
makes her lips draw together like her mother's
when they cannot be opened without anger,
and she knows this much--the man
who asks it of her snores without apology
like the other talk show examples
who've found themselves married to women
who toss, sigh, fart, cough, unendingly,
unrecorded, in the night.

French Roast

I wake up with a hand in hair
I don't recognize, although
it's been the same unruly length
almost twenty years.

Then there is this man
I forgot would be at the table,
staring like he always does into the nicks
we think have character
as we get by second-hand.

Last night on TV, a man said,
"I love someone else,"
and his books, clothes,
a lamp, tennis racquets
scattered down the stairway
as a woman aimed for his head.

That could be the start of my divorce,
but I wonder if a real betrayal
could seep through the layers
of imagined smiles
from beautiful faces
to catch my attention--

if as he sits pouring
a fresh cup of coffee
and claiming to have already
met his future wife,
he is offering a buffer
with make-believe affairs
for the ones that haven't
happened yet.

It all matters so little.
I forget easily he loves women
he hopes could believe
he has a routine
of not being routine,
of making plans for something
beyond moving eventually
from the spot he's sitting in now.

I'm content with the things I can't remember--
names of people I once felt close to,
names of co-workers he says
know so much more about
all the life we spend apart.

And I'm content with the way
he wears his skin so that
it looks like something
that could touch my sense of touch
even when I can't piece together
what's familiar about me to anyone.

I smile, negotiate my right to silence
with a grimace, watch my reflection in the toaster,
thinking how many wrinkles I'll make
by squinting enough to focus,
and how if I tilt my head a little
the two of us will capsize
into a crooked blur of appliances.
I'll start to pull myself together.
He'll spread out in fragments.
Or maybe I'll never straighten out.
He won't notice for days.

The sign at the bank across the street
keeps lighting up the message
that nothing much downtown
is homeowned anymore.
Still, we're the regulars here.

His and Hers

When they first met,
their differences were not so bad.
They liked to brag about
how good they were
at letting everything go,
at feeling comfortable
with meals prepared separately--
a joke they were fond of,
one that always caused a stir
among restaurant staffs
when she would say, "Please,
I'll have the pasta and tomato sauce
with a salad, but no cheese
or bacon--even the artificial bits--
or eggs and if the dressings
all come with dairy products,
just a little oil and vinegar
or plain, even, is fine."
And he would say, "I'll have the steak,
the big one, the 18 oz.,
but no sauteed vegetables on the side.
Some fries maybe, but nothing baked
and for godsakes no salad."

So when it came to the custody fight,
they could not imagine
how they could be so dirty--
accusations flung back and forth
concerning hot dogs for breakfast
with all their disturbing nitrates
or telling the kid ice cream
makes his body twist and curdle inside
in reaction to its horrible array
of allergens and disease
that doesn't really die in the freezer.

They wanted, they really wanted
to go back to a time
when they could let the child
learn what he would
from either parent,
when they could care again
to exchange stories--
hers about the calf she bottle fed
all through one winter,
made particular friends with
by getting up early before school
to carry the heavy formula out

where she didn't just leave it
in a rack, but stayed there,
holding it as she talked
Dumplins through the fact that
all the other calves had moms.
Then the first time
her brother pointed out
that Dumplins was inside her taco,
she just couldn't take it anymore,
began crying for what
must have become of the other animals--
Rusty, Sammy, even Split-pea the pig.

His story had to do
with a missing mom as well
and a dad who ordinarily
didn't have much to say,
but when it came to beef,
he was right there.
They had good times, made hamburgers
the size of a whole paper plate
with which they didn't
even need side dishes,
went Sunday afternoons
to the Big Smoke outside A&P
for the best ribs a little guy
could ever ask to eat
without a fork or napkin or anything,
just a funny, slobbering race
to see whose tummy would fill up first.

The baby was the end of so much,
with constant pulls
between soy milk, organic carrots
and eggs scrambled in bacon grease,
broken into soft,
finger size pieces. What would
become of him was no joke
and Mom could not
let him grow without compassion,
without a place in his heart
for the plight of the chickens
running free-range
in his grandfather's barnyard,
without a big love
for healthy school lunches
filled with home-baked, whole-grain
vegetable pies and colorful,
juicy mixtures of fresh grapes
and strawberries. And at home,
assortments of Mediterranean salads

or pizzas topped with small slices
of oyster mushrooms, asparagus, cheese
made from tofu or hemp--
things she knew would make
his father's throat constrict
at the very thought that
such oddities could be
pleasing to her.

Dad could not let him go
without lessons
in his own pleasures,
the comforting decadence
the boy's mother would
rather starve than accept
in a polska kielbasa,
smothered in barbecue, mustard
spread across the hoagie
in preparation for globs
of fried onions. And on the side,
cheese dips, sour cream dips,
a great gooey mound
of chocolate poured over
the fattiest, most chemically altered
blend of frozen eggs
and sugar and cream
a dad could find.

Lydia

A woman is able to save herself
from fainting--the slight smell of gas,
the unexpected shortage of safe liquids
with frozen pipes and melting freezers,
her low blood sugar--we have no control
over these. But there it is.
For the sake of the infant, she is able
to save herself from fainting.

This is not about strength.
She is ordinary and grows quite weak
and cannot for anyone's sake
think what to do about
the plastic bags of leftovers
beginning to slosh
as she opens the top compartment.

She could make soup.
She could move them outside,
away from the kitchen,
the one room with heat
from a stove, but this is not
about acting deliberately.
She is hungry and cannot
think what to do.

She is waiting for a man
to come home who will not expect
her to have grown so fragile.
She does not like
to be dependant, but knows
when the man comes home
he will understand
how to help her.

She has not planned
for the ice storm,
the loss of power,
the treacherous roads that will
make him very, very late.

She could eat so many things
to make herself feel better--
an orange from the box
bought for Christmas,
crackers, a Little Debbie's
snack cake bought for
her husband's lunch.

But her thoughts are a blur.
She does not know
if she has the strength still
to peel or break open plastic.
She cannot think through
the foods filling her cabinets
to those that do not
require electricity for preparation.

She cannot remember
what she had last to eat.
It should seem simple enough,
but she does not know
what to do--only that
she is holding an infant
and must save herself
from fainting.

The Story Goes

A woman got angry once
and her son crawled under the house,
hoping to avoid punishment.

He stayed there all day,
not budging for the ice cream truck
or the city's mosquito spray
he liked to jump up and down in,
pretending to be fogbound.

When his father came home,
the mother, who by this time
was worried, sent him after the boy,
who cried out, "Did she get you too?
Come on in. There's room."

All his life, the boy's family
liked to tell this story at dinner,
among strangers and the sister's children
who would listen over and over.

Once when someone told it again
and everyone in the room was pretending
to be surprised by the ending,
the boy was thinking about
the list of complaints
his wife had just rattled off,
the things he'd been doing wrong for years
without anyone speaking up,
till "poof," he finds out
there's a list,
someone has kept track.

He could remember apologizing for the times
he's said the wrong thing
after cancelling plans.
But he'd done it too often,
for no real reason, she said.

He tried to think of reasons,
but got tired and just wanted
the smell of that house,
to feel the way he could underneath,
where women wouldn't come,
where he and the dog
could stay for awhile,
making Matchbox car tracks
in the cool dampness

of the dirt.

He thought how he'd like
to lie there again,
then hours later--among
loving family advice
from which he could not seem
to pull off an escape--
catch a whiff of dog breath
and musty under-the-houseness
still in his clothes and skin,
making the feel of hiding last,
just a little longer.

Particularities

Assume you're a woman.
And you have friends who are women.
And all of these women
have constant opinions concerning men.

You call a friend when you
have nothing to distract you
from your thoughts--
Beverly, perhaps.

You say a word to her,
one that seems to have something
to do with your life.

It could be any word--
blue, tall, ass,
smart, taciturn--
but assume you say, "Jerk."

You say it as though
you could never mean anything else
and back it up with the force of stories--

yesterday, you asked him
to check the mail
and he never moved
his blue-jeaned ass from the chair
to do this one, small thing,

then at dinner he picked a fight
over the way you bit your lip
between sentences
and tore at least three strips
off your chicken
before eating one.

Beverly asks if he is still
working Saturdays to fix up the garage
for that extra room you wanted,
but you don't care
to be distracted.
You have more--

today, he took a nap after work,
sleeping straight through
the last good daylight,
knowing so well he'd promised
to walk down to lake,
the creepy part of town
where you can't go on your own.

Anyway, he owes you
for the trouble he gives you
over those ten pounds you never lose,
the poochy feel they add to your belly.

He owes you--so much
he could never catch up,
and he should know.
But even after letting you down
he just took over the remote
without saying a word,

without noticing
how you'd made a point by then
of settling down
to doing what you wanted
without him.

You don't understand
how he can be so assured
in not needing
to think of you,
so distant like that.

You hate it so much
you start to cry a little
and Beverly
knows exactly how you feel.

She understands easily
without needing to hear more
what a jerk he really is,

but the next day when she calls
to find out what else he has done,
what simple, but necessary things
he's forgotten to notice
that give you
that lump in your throat,
that small squeak in your voice
when you talk on the phone,
you can't imagine
where she got such ideas.

You fret about it all night,
complaining to the sweet man
who fixed your dinner,
washed up afterwards
and absentmindedly
rubbed your feet while the show
you like best was on--
only one all week you both enjoy
and he remembers more often than you.

You wish your friends would
quit interfering, quit dragging up
itsy bitsy details to criticize,
to jealously make you
feel bad for your love.

They don't even know what he's like.
Not one clue, you insist
to the tender, smiling guy
who got up especially
to hand you the phone.

Retreats

A woman lives in a small house--
yellow, maybe lighter if the dust
and mildew are washed off.

Sundays, she sorts through the week
by drinking in coffee
and the feel of belonging
among cluttered porches
and uncut grass.

Sometimes the phone rings
and a man says, "Are you mad?
Did I act like a jerk?"

She stares at the dirty plates
and empty beer bottles
stacked near her sink,
answers, "No,
I didn't notice, at least."

She thinks her hangover
is a lot like his--
the kind that doesn't mean much.

Still, she'll think about it all day,
believing it should, wondering
if she needs a moment
important enough
to wear her down, to make her
want to keep returning to it,
keep moving on.

Outside, boys ride past on bikes,
carrying rods and reels.
There's no pond near by,
just a sewage ditch
at the end of the block.

She takes a seat on her steps,
pleased to imagine
a day spent casting and reeling
and casting and reeling,
undistracted by the hope
of something to catch.

Finding Shape

A woman he doesn't know, will never meet,
is overwhelmed by the possibility
of comprehending, _in our lifetime_,
the nature of matter--
the bits and pieces of
the bits and pieces of
the bits and pieces that
hold together her unfathomable self.

Listening as she describes
tearfully, for the News,
the job she no longer has,
but he does, safe for awhile
in a different channel
of funding,

he is struck by her passion,
the way she says she'll wait,
the way she must be wondering
if something he says over lunch,
a sequence his friend records,
a frustrated move he makes stupidly,
without hope, will lead to discovery,
to a new understanding of how unknowables
come together to make something
that keeps its shape.

He has his own therapy to think of--
being left again, neglecting at fifteen
to construct the formula that would
mark his place among scientists--
but he'd like to write to her,
remind her there's no reason anyway,
no evidence strong enough to expect
things to be put together
the way she might guess,
the way anyone might guess.

There is no good reason
for him to believe
if he goes to work in the mornings
and returns most evenings
at a regular time
to take an interest
in what goes on outside his lab
that his marriage might last.

There is no good reason
for her to believe
if she sticks out her degree,
works hard to show
she cares for her projects,
that a Congress, voting,
could see her job as significant.

But they share a good belief
in possibilities, in the strange,
charmed truth revealed by quarks
as they are traced daily
through penciled theories
and computer monitors.
They are observers,
careful to hold on
to what happens in spaces
of time too short to imagine,
too brief to divide
a thought down to.

Like him, despite everything,
she will keep trying
to figure patterns, playing
at designing that last tiny part
of herself, the one that insists
on keeping things whole.

And he would like to remind her
they have known for a long time,
as far back as homeroom,
that each decision,
each order of numbers on the page,
brush of his hand against skin,
each idea she is forced to come to
for new employment
means giving up another,
a chain of results that can never
be measured, can never
be reversed to a point
that will make clear--
this one was good,
this one was bad.

And whatever turns out to be true
(he explains in his head
to the woman he knows
he will never track down)
is believed because it seems constant,
because from one moment to the next,
across the space of a memory,

he can be sure he has no wife now
if each time he dials, waits
for an answer and hangs up
results in the same thirty-cents
on his phone bill.
He can be sure he is hard at work
if the same push from his lungs
leads to the same sound of frustration,
if up continues to look like elongated bulbs,
down like the uneven, unrepeatable mess
of coffee stains on the gray
surface of his desk.

I Was Not Through Desiring

I understand about endings,
about loneliness with its knotted muscles,
cramped stomach, fatigued voice
calling into work--
"I can't make it today."

I understand it's no one's fault--
not hers, his, ours or theirs.
Placing blame, it's true, can only make it
last that much longer,
and I should have known
what I was getting into.
It's time I made a new life for myself.

I've been through this part before.
All of my friends have made it
past this part before.
Once, the guy was dead--
irretrievable, unblamable, over
in a way you can't help loving,

and I made it through the moment
when I realized any more
useless longing and I'd be nearly dead,
as good as dead myself,

the parts of my brain having
ceased to function that remembered
how to make eye contact, smile,
say, "Hello," "Nice to meet you,"
"Would you like to have dinner
or fall in love sometime?"

We've all practiced letting go--
the dead pet, the abuse in our parent's
backgrounds that wouldn't let them
show affection, the hopeless
high school crushes
we still had at thirty-two,
the people who've broken dinner silences
to say softly, "I don't think I like
being married very much."

We learn eventually to survive,
but I brood myself awake in the night,
thinking if only, if only,
if only I weren't physically struck
throughout the tender stiffness of my chest,
my eyes, cheekbones, with the idea
of your cruel absence,

even crueler presence in my daydreams,
afternoons wasted hoping you will
show up to make me care more
for the claustrophobic feel
of the same old, same old road signs
and street repairs that make up
my path to and from
the places I go each day.

I want to believe
the town where I'm stuck,
where I've lost touch with friends,
the sofa I use for thinking and television,
that I'm sure I'll brush
the crumbs away from soon
would be so much nicer for me

if you would let it slip
that you've been in the habit all along
of fondling the t-shirt
I brought you from Florida,
of ordering the meals I like in restaurants.

But I understand enough to know
it isn't true that you could help me,
that I never knew so much about you anyway,
about what was going on in your head
when you wandered restlessly
from room to room with your toothbrush
or grinned as if from affection
while you straightened
the towels I'd slung casually
across the bathroom rack.

The time I knew you was nothing
compared to the rest of the life
I'll survive, the ordeals
I'll have a right to suffer through,
and years from now I won't care
who you're divorcing, will hardly
recognize your name
when I glimpse it in the paper.

It only matters that I move on,
that everyone moves on,
that hungry children play happily
on my street and in places
with even more crime than the one stabbing
of my neighbor by his lover,

and this morning as I struggled
toward my shower, I could tell
I meant it
when I shook my crazy head
and whispered to the shadows
of my stretching arms,
"nothing about you
has anything to do with me."
Hasn't for a long time,
forever almost.

Section III

THE SIEGE

Maneuvers

As he and Matthew prepare for battle,
Dusty asks, "Will they put George Bush
in jail for starting a war?"
Then the couch becomes a ship
that kills fish,
but as long as the boys
stay on it, the Iraqis
mostly can't get to them.
The pillows are bomber jets
that go down once tossed
to the other side
of the room. No one in particular
has to shoot at them.
Dusty believes if this were real,
if he were in charge,
there would be no need for war.
He could just punch out
the other guy, the bad one,
and go home to the praise
of his friends and his mom.
Matthew, adopted by his
Mississippi family,
always wondering if he looks more
like he's from South Korea than North,
decides that for today,
for this barrage on the book shelves
and piano bench that form
parameters for the desert,
he might as well be from Baghdad.
Crawling across the room,
careful to keep his army tank, a blanket,
between himself and Dusty,
he suddenly shoves his protection
to the middle of the room,
declaring it on fire,
a barrier around which to shoot.
The boys do not quite
understand the connection
they've been told may exist
between their grandfather's heart attack
and the constant news
of war sounds and scenes,
the constant possibility
of worse trouble to come.
But they've talked among themselves--
about the noise they are
asked to keep down
when they wait in the hospital lobby,

about the way their father
should explain to their grandfather as well
that the war is a long way off
and their cousin, who has
written to say the Scuds
have become worrisome, but routine,
is with the guys who are winning.
They think their cousin must not be
having fun, must be scared
that his grandfather will die
there in the hospital
with him away at war,
risking his life,
must be having trouble sleeping
with sounds of bomber planes
echoing in his head.
Still, they want more action,
more chances to prove themselves
than pretend bullets
aimed at a brother, so they
move on to the La-Z-Boy, a jeep
in which Matthew once again
supports the Allies
by driving heroically
toward the desert soldiers
coming at him from a television screen
as Dusty fires off wads
of the comic page and business section,
wanting to know, "Is this
on all the channels?
Is it coming on again
tomorrow?"

The Siege

His summer job is to become a monument,
remind people from Ohio and Kansas
that Vicksburg will never overcome war,
but usually, as they watch him
kneel behind a cannon, on the lookout
for Yankees who come
from the other end of the park,
the Kudzu-covered past,

he isn't thinking at all about the South,
just fondling the name "Jennie"
where it's scratched into
the black rust-proof paint
of the cross-section.

He heard a story once
about an angel with six toes,
a picture of it hanging in a fort in Texas.

And when he is here,
acting out his part as the statue of a soldier,
he wonders at it, at Jennie,
at the idea of angels
piecing her body back together
and adding an extra toe.

He imagines her, with new white tennis shoes,
slipping her foot in so that this toe
smoothes down, disappearing
into her body like the belly
he'd watched her zip
over and over into tight jeans.

She'd like the feel of it,
of an oddity the angels would
tease her for, then ignore
as if there were nothing much to it,
nothing much to being different,
to sliding off a motorcycle
into a new existence.

The impact, the jolt of cannons
that are never fired,
strangers who can't see his fingers
tracing the letters that make up "Jennie"
and don't care how his feet
shape into his boots,
would be nothing more to her

than a vague sense of something missing,
something like the fear of a soldier
who can't believe the enemy was ever there.

What I decided in School

I want to be the last person left
after Jesus or the bomb

so that Woolworths, traffic signals,
newspaper headlines,
quick stop cigarette racks,
music choices everywhere
will be in my control.

I want to redefine rules,

drive off in a Highway Patrol car
just because it's in my way,

then leave it on show at Vicksburg Honda.

I want to hop from hood to hood
in the Sack & Save parking lot,

pause a few times to rest
next to dashboard fast food trash
and carwash coupons.

I want to perch
on top of the temperature sign
at the bank,

find out what ants look like
when they're far enough away
to look like ants.

I want to break open cases
in the Civil War museum,

play fifes found
in a dug-up gun boat

till Jennie
who died after band contest
gets tired of dancing with soldiers.

I want to conjure high school jocks
onto spiral candy machine rods,

push A-7 for Mark Stevens
then toss him out unopened
for a quarterback or M&Ms.

I want to be a crayon,
draw myself into any shape
that catches my attention.

Bus Stop

Toeing out gum and Reeses wrappers
I watch water
edging up the ditch,

want to join the pine straw,
float through the culvert,

then walk up to strangers,
ask for a towel, sunscreen,
a lawn chair.

I play foosball badly,
forget every year to set my clock
back or up,

then every shot
and every chance to live
an hour away from myself
comes as a surprise.

Today I told my students
I couldn't remember
where I was supposed to go
as I was walking
toward our room.

They said who are you
and can we please leave,
but it was too late.

I'd become their teacher,

needing thunder, distance,
friends I can sleep through,

wanting to ride somewhere
to know I can.

Sharing a Ride

A man I know well, but am nervous
of putting up with through
three states of heavy,
holiday traffic,

complains that my car
has no tape deck.
He cannot <u>bear</u> radio.
He is <u>desperate</u>
for something to listen to
and we are only
forty minutes outside
our starting point.

Air drumming works, at first,
as he makes his way through
the CDs he's committed
to memory, then the songs
he has written himself
for bands that were good
but never quite worked out.

Finally, he gives in
and turns the knob
back and forth,
back and forth,
looking for something
he will not hate within
the first three notes,

then suddenly, a palm slams
across the dashboard
as he screams--
"She's flat, dammit.
How can people take that,
make her famous
and not even know who I am
when she can't hit
the goddamned notes?
Listen, can't you hear
how awful she is?"

I have not heard much
of the woman's voice
and questions of notes
just make me nod
in a way that suggests,
"calm down, calm down,"

as I think of myself at my Dad's piano,
playing A-A-A, singing G-G-G
with varying degrees
of sharp,

and my Dad walking by to say--"
Sounds good. Keep it up"--
with both of us understanding
I would never have any idea
how close or distant
to the notes I'd gotten.

I wonder about my student
who keeps saying "memorization"
when he means "memory,"
if he can tell by my reaction
something isn't quite right,
and if my reluctance
to explain those
extra syllables
feels to him like my Dad
saying he thinks
I have a pretty voice.

My friend is drowning out
the woman from the radio
with sounds she should be making,
and I picture myself, even now,
with a hairbrush microphone
standing on top of my bed
singing loudly
to window shades
and a collection of souvenirs
a family friend brought back
from different parts
of Europe.

My friend has talent.
He has worked hard to be good
at what everyone says
he is good at,

but I'm convinced
that even with him beating injustice
into my less than perfect pitch,
I would still know how
to be a star.

Around in Squares

Today, she decides she cares nothing for Ireland,
so she signs her name Fitzgerald--
Mary Fitzgerald--a name
in need of a story.

Once she heard a grandfather was shot dead
for stealing a cow, but only after
leaving his twelve children
for a woman he never married.
Out of grief and shame his son
came to America, dropping the "Fitz"
so that people would say forever,
"Oh yes, Gerald, like the first name,
like the president."

Nothing much about this is true, though,
and right now she needs roots in Oklahoma
where a career is uncertain
and she worries that no one remembers
the pain her grandmother felt
at losing her Choctaw family
for a prejudiced, drunk of a lover.

She can drive for hours, there,
in huge, perfect squares.
Imagine, a whole state planned out like that,
roads an exact mile apart,
replacing prairie measures
for the arrival of people
with no good sense of direction.

Today, her daughter resolves to like herself more.
A Slim Fast for breakfast, another for lunch
and her belly begins less and less
to resemble her mother's.

Tell me a story, the girl says,
about you when you were little,
about Grandmother before she had you.
Tell me everyone was beautiful and talented
and it's no fluke I'll turn out to be loved.

Mississippi

for Randy Phillis

I can't climb pine trees.
The limbs start too high,

but we have a magnolia
and Emily can get
more than half way up
if I stand in the swing
and give her a boost.

She's almost nine now
and I've still never been
on a sled--

with so much time, years even,
between snows and the only
clear hill so close
to the road--

but I do know how it feels
to slide my car down a ditch,

brush my fear off
in the weeds,

then pick through
barbed wire,

wanting to be
almost anywhere else
and wishing uphill could happen
just as fast.

Once, when I was small enough
to still have Hannah
taking care of me,

I tried to run away,

got as far as the sidewalk,
fell down

and just sat for a long time
crying,

but nobody noticed
so I went back to the porch step
and my dog,
brooding over distances.

Emily is different,
knows how to say--
things need to change.

Yesterday, I told her
about a man in the grocery store
who was angry at someone who'd claimed

all Southern black women have suffered.

She said a boy in her class
has had to change the N word

in his jokes
but the teacher still smiles,
a little.

I wonder sometimes if Hannah
had a whole life of suffering
she never talked about

or if part of it
had to do with a child
who wouldn't take naps

and swung her slinky
back and forth
from the top of the stairs
in front of a little window
over the dining room doorway,

if she resented,
like I did, the upstairs,
the holding back
from guests,
but never made
a good break for it.

Last week over lunch,
a friend said to me--

the whole town is screwed up
and it looks like
we're at risk.

I tried to tell Emily
to take risks instead,

and she looks happy enough
for now, just knowing
I'm somewhere on the ground,
waiting.

Something Inside Mother Hurts

Sometimes at night
you imagine a sound
and your Mother's voice
circles the thought--
"I'm awake now,
perhaps for hours."

"I have something to tell you,"
she says. Again and Again
through the night, you will
think of her begging, "Don't get upset,"
as her body begins to die.

You're like the other girls now.
You carry a shoulder strap purse.
You bought penny candy
and wore good shoes to college
with the change Mother tossed
into a tomato-colored bowl.
Don't get upset.

You knew the answer
for the eleven-year-old
who asked how to fake an orgasm.
"You don't have to, Dear,"
you mouthed along with
the talk show host.
"Don't be afraid."

There are things
you aren't afraid of now.
You learned not to go forever,
the whole sixth grade,
without saying--"I need
to go to the bathroom. . .
I need small things sometimes,
just a hug."

But you don't know
how to give up a mother,
how to smooth the hair back
across your own face
and make the big decisions
about standing up straight
and getting on the bus
prepared for the morning.

Mother says it's OK.
When you broke your arm,
she wished it were her.
Now she doesn't mind so much
that she hurts so badly
as long as it isn't
someone like you,
someone she can't
take care of enough.

Fellowship

A woman with strong wrists
creams the corn.
Over and over, as she sits
alone on the carport,
there is the chore
of slice, slice, slice,
scrape, scrape, scrape.
Her clothes and glasses
are splattered.
The children who come outside
occasionally with questions
back away to avoid the mess.
At night, after everyone else
is settled, she has cleaned herself up,
but is standing over the stove still,
scooping her corn into
plastic freezer bags, carefully,
so as not to annoy her husband
with wastefulness.

She will offer her Pyrex dish
to the long table
in the fellowship hall
where other women
bring their casseroles,
their caramel cakes
with perfect pecan halves
lined up in unwavering rows,
their chicken, soaked overnight
in buttermilk and seasonings,
for the taste everyone counts on.

They are bringing something
we can feel good about.

There may be men in the room
who beat their daughters,
who scream *whore, whore*
to a child who has
done nothing other
than get the silly giggles
in the presence of a boy.

The minister may have
turned his own niece away
from the sanctuary
for the belief
that her dress was inappropriate,
but she will not
be turned away from the food.

The mothers will not allow it.
They will use the space
in which they have power
to teach her generosity.

They may not be asked
to take part in the service.
They may not be elected to office.
When they volunteer to work,
scrubbing the toilets
or minding the nursery,
they will be thanked
through their husband's names,
but they will bring so much--

fried potatoes, new potatoes
in cream sauce,
new potatoes boiled
with green beans,
chicken and dumplings,
fried chicken, chicken
baked with barbecue sauce.

One woman will bring a cobbler
and we will notice her limp,
thinking how it must have hurt
to squat down
gathering blueberries
in the hot morning sun.
We will love her.

And we will feel loved
as we notice how much good
we are offered--
the speckled butter beans
and small green butter beans,
the home baked wheat bread
as well as the Brown & Serve rolls,
the squash casserole
with cheese, mushroom soup
and bread crumbs,
the casserole
of uncertain ingredients.

We will take from it all.
We will enjoy it all.
We will be fat and guilty
of all manner of excess,
but for once, for a time,
for the sake of
genuine tenderness,
we will just be glad.

We will not criticize,
devoting equal time
to the deviled eggs
and the coconut cream pie.

We will not think about
the teenager
who almost died
of a home-attempted abortion
when she was not,
it turns out, pregnant.
We will not wonder
what made her too afraid
to ask for help.

We will be happy
to sample fried tomatoes
from one woman's garden,
eggplant from another.
Grandmothers will bring divinity,
fudge, pralines,
and we will hug them
without asking
what they have heard
from the grown children
who have left.

Women will spread
all they have to give
across the table,
They will stand patiently aside
as we help ourselves
to more and more and more.

They will watch the children
while we eat. They will clean
and refill tea
and will not once ask
to push ahead for their own turns.

They will offer way too much,
and we will take it and love it
until we hurt.

On Being Asked to Confront Myself

Some days Yockanookany
is just the river
near my grandmother's house,
others it's red clay on swimsuits
or newsmen and friends
tripping over its pronunciation.

I'm sure I add different definitions
to the words I know well
every time they circle
my consciousness,
but synapses that won't give me
more than three second clips
of who I really am
get to decide which one I use,

so that when someone asks--
"where are you from?"--
home feels like most any place
I've ever been,

and when I hear my name, "Sharon,"
even if I can't think
how to respond,
I know, almost immediately,
I'm supposed to,

because I keep storing it,
randomly, to keep track
of something
I should understand.

Using my left hand all these years,
I've been told too often,
means I work better with those cells
that can't balance my checkbook,

or it could mean I'm accident prone,
will die fairly young,
or perhaps grow old
as a drunk or an artist.

How can I take responsibility
for that? I refuse.

I refuse to do anything more
than discover my life,
as if I were in a science lab,
surrounded by exact
measurements and temperatures
and gaseous mixtures that for the most part
do as they're expected,
while a community works
to make sense
of slight irregularities.

I understand that I'm content
to let the things that come together
when I think "Sharon"
tangle as they will
around me,

that I want to live with people
who love me easily,
who expect only the ease
of spontaneity in return,
an unexpectedness
in generous pampering
or the soothing talk for a rough day
of, "remember, remember
how funny and smart you were last week."

I want them to happen in moments
as small as suddenly realizing
during a trip to Europe
the French I've heard for weeks
but can't understand
no longer sounds out of place,
that something else
has become familiar.

I understand about myself
that I have to think hard
not to smoke, think hard not to
talk too much or daydream
my way through work,
not to let my dishes, trash,
laundry go to chaos around me,
but after days without
a cigarette, I can pick one up
with no thoughts of savoring it
or guilt or anything in particular.
But the comfort of nothing deliberate.

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VITA

Sharon Laree Gerald

Candidate For The Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Dissertation: AROUND IN SQUARES

Major Field: English

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Brookhaven, Mississippi, November 11, 1967, the daughter of Rev. B.F. and Mrs. Fay Gerald.

Education: Graduated from Warren Central High School, Vicksburg, Mississippi, May 1985; received Bachelor of Science degree in English and Radio, Television, Film from the University of Southern Mississippi, December 1989; received Master of Arts degree in English from the University of Southern Mississippi, August 1991. Completed the Requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree at Oklahoma State University in May 1996.

Experience: Employed by Oklahoma State University as a Graduate Teaching Associate, 1991-1996.

Professional Memberships: Modern Language Association.