

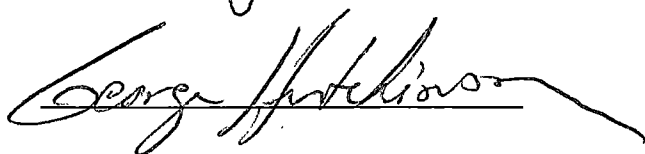
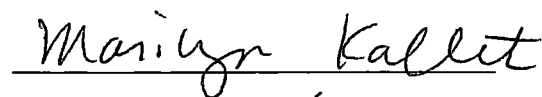
To the Graduate School:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Kristin Campbell Robertson entitled "Regathering." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.



Arthur Smith, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:



Accepted for the Council:



Associate Vice Chancellor
and Dean of The Graduate School

REGATHERING

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Kristin Campbell Robertson
December 1999

For My Mother

Acknowledgements

Expressing my appreciation to people for their support throughout the writing of a collection of poems seems more like thanking them for being instrumental in my life. Poems originate in a place close to the soul, and, regardless of how sentimental it may sound, these people in different ways have served as guides for me to get to the place where the poems are.

I would like to thank Dr. George Hutchinson who despite short notice agreed to jump headfirst into a creative thesis committee.

I would also like to thank Dr. Marilyn Kallet who wrote me a note once that said as a poet one can never be too bizarre. I have learned from Dr. Kallet not only how to write better poems, but also that a woman can be both a poet with an aura of candles and jazz and a mom.

I would especially like to thank Dr. Arthur Smith. In each poetry workshop with Dr. Smith, I was newly mesmerized by his theories on how poems work, how they do "that thing." Knocking on his door with my first published poem in hand will be one of the most priceless moments of my life.

As I leave the University of Tennessee and add yet another piece of paper to our hallway of diplomas, I must thank my grandmother, the Morgans, Heather and Matthew, and Anna Lisa for their support through all of the endless mess.

I would like to thank my dad for his financial support and his well-timed "Do Good" Post-it notes. He made it possible for me to go to college. I dedicate this collection of poems to my mom, the other half of my brain.

Abstract

This collection of poems attempts to make connections between familiar images and larger truths. These poems are accessible because they present moments from a speaker's life, yet they seek to transcend the everyday to a higher consciousness. Also, these poems gathered together like wildflowers seek to explore the varying phyla of love and the ways they are interdependent.

Table of Contents

Introduction / 1
In Dreams / 12
The Omega / 13
Stained Glass / 14
A Story About Rain / 15
Morning Song / 16
Early Spring / 17
For Mikel / 18
The Ritual / 19
Summer Thunderstorms / 20
Lover / 21
Linseed Oil / 22
His Mother / 23
Spectator / 24
The Yellow Room / 25
Black Oranges / 26
South Street / 27
Aggie's Brown Button / 28
Night Vision / 29
Tribal Woman / 30
The Door Shuts, and I Sit / 31
Morning After / 32
Shopping for Angelfish / 33
I Named My Fish Insomnia / 34
Upstream / 35
While You Were Out / 36
Daydreaming / 37
Indian Summer / 38
Visitor / 39
Leaving the Dogs / 40
Indian Summer 2 / 41
Doing Salmon Justice / 42
Talisman / 43
Malice / 44
One Last Question / 45
Ferryman / 46
Woman Frantic With Loss / 47

Breakfast Man /	48
Paradise /	49
The Reapers /	50
Praise the Dogwoods /	51
Bye Bye /	52
Summer People /	53
Lighthouses /	54
Choosing a Husband /	55
Thesis /	56
In the Sandbox /	57

Vita /	58
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Introduction

Filed away between ivory baby kimonos, fingerpainted hand turkeys, and my brother's one-eared Peter Rabbit, the first piece I ever wrote, a story entitled "The King of Beets," yellows in the dark quiet of my mother's cedar chest. I wrote the story when I was seven and in the second grade. I do not remember the premise, except that a man was going to buy a beet for his wife to cook for dinner. I recall that the man wore a fuchsia shirt (the story was fully illustrated) and that he commenced to battle with the giant beet at the end. I could not say why the man was buying a beet for his wife or why he fought with the beet when he got it home. Nevertheless, it was the beginning of my opus.

After that, I wrote stories on wide-ruled paper about young girls and boys adventuring through fabricated Southern towns. I must have been reading Mark Twain at the time. When my aunt and uncle bought a computer I typed my stories and poems and saved them on floppy disks that were, at that time, still floppy.

During junior high and high school, puberty and teen angst polluted my countless journals I hid under my bed. However, I did on occasion write poems about lima beans or owls that were not solely

lyrical and splattered with hackneyed expressions of *feelings*. If I flipped through the spiral notebooks today, these poems would probably best showcase my early predilection to write poetry with regard to real life.

Then I started college at the University of Tennessee. I decided fairly early that I wanted to major in English. However, my intention was to attend law school after I graduated with a Bachelor's degree. My father went to law school at UT. I often struggled throughout my childhood with my parents' divorce, but in my college years, perhaps because neither of them was near, I realized a lot of the sadness I felt about their separation. I examined my father's absence in my life, and I recognized that my parents were two divergent lines running opposite ways from me. I was always closer to my mother, and I know now that law school represented a means to shorten the distance between my father and me.

Needless to say, I broke the bad news. I explained to my father that I wanted to attend graduate school, but I was going to focus on writing poems. Not memorizing torts. Although I know my choice somewhat disappointed him, he always asked about my classes, when was I graduating, questions like these. To this day, however, my father has never read any of my poems.

A lot of my childhood memories arise in my poetry as I attempt to bridge my want for a connection to my father to my present relationships. Ultimately, I desire to connect the different kinds of love to each other. And to recognize their interdependence.

In writing about a yellow room in my house in Atlanta I discover ways in which love in my childhood connects to love I feel today, romantic or otherwise. In college I first discovered that poetry could do this, could make these leaps, could explain or hypothesize some of the mysteries of life.

After I attended several poetry workshops, I began to understand how poems, both contemporary and earlier, reflect aspects of a person's life and search for connections between past and present, the physical and spiritual, life and death. I confess that I always read poetry for perhaps no other reason than to revel in the words. But it wasn't until I registered for creative writing classes as an undergraduate and I began studying poets such as Jack Gilbert that I was inspired to study the art of writing poetry.

Jack Gilbert searches for what he calls "the great fires." He quests for an understanding of love. Often Gilbert begins with a scene and explores it for an issue, a question that he hopes will bring him closer to an awareness in his life. In other poems, Jack Gilbert

begins by asking a question or presenting a hypothesis to test. Throughout the lines, he “checks” himself to come to a conclusion (or not) at the end.

For example, in his poem titled “The Great Fires,” Gilbert presents his thesis in the first line of the poem: “Love is apart from all things.” He continues in the poem to test what love is not. He explains that passion is the path but it doesn’t bring us to love. Halfway into the poem he makes the claim that love is one of the great fires—that is why it is apart from all things—and that neither desire nor passion lasts because each tries in some way to be love. He ends with, “Love allows us to walk in the sweet music of our particular heart.” Whether Gilbert answers the questions he asks by the end of his poems, he always achieves insight somehow closer to an understanding of those “fires” than when he started.

Also, Gilbert writes about specific moments that happened in his life, inside which he attempts to find answers. For example, he often mourns the loss of his wife, Michiko, in his poems. In “Married” Gilbert describes his search for Michiko’s lost black hairs. Here, the simplicity of the event, Gilbert repotting an avocado, reverberates outward to encompass larger feelings of loss:

I came back from the funeral and crawled
around the apartment, crying hard,
searching for my wife’s hair.

For two months got them from the drain,
from the vacuum cleaner, under the refrigerator,
and off the clothes, in the closet.
But after other Japanese women came,
there was no way to be sure which were
hers, and I stopped. A year later,
repotting Michiko's avocado, I find
a long black hair tangled in the dirt.

Jack Gilbert shows how the discovery of a thread of his wife's hair can reveal his sorrow. I learned from Gilbert how to begin with a scene, an inspiration, and follow that moment through a poem to discover what prompted the dithyramb, or the point of inspiration.

While reading Gilbert's poetry encouraged me to read poems in terms of day-by-day life, I wasn't convinced to write poems about my *own* life until I read the poems of a good friend of Jack Gilbert's, Linda Gregg. When I began reading Gregg's poetry, I was in my first year as a graduate student at the University of Tennessee, and I was fairly convinced that I knew nothing. I spent hours each day in classes with students who quoted every possible piece of literature, British or American, and I often left campus and drove to my apartment with my jaw on the steering wheel from both sensory overload and feelings of inadequacy. However, I still had this propensity to write, and I persevered in front of the computer at night, or on napkins during lunch, or on the backs of unpaid parking tickets while driving.

I read *Chosen By the Lion* by Gregg, and I realized I possessed what I needed to explore every facet of love through my personal experiences. I recognize now that Gilbert was doing the same things, but Gregg's perception and her hypotheses came from her *female* self, a self with which I could identify. I started to tell stories. I began making connections on the page between what I knew and what I wanted to know, often finding the answers in what I had written.

I have memorized every word of Gregg's poem, "I Thought On His Desire For Three Days." She begins,

I chose this man, consciously, deliberately.
I thought on his desire for three days
and then said yes. In return, it was summer.

Here immediately she establishes her own scene—what is happening in her "particular heart." I had similar experiences, and, while originally I thought I knew nothing, I decided after reading Gregg's poem that I knew *everything*, or at least everything I needed to know to begin exploring life in terms of my own particularities. At the end of this poem, Gregg writes,

...When the wife
called and said I was a whore, I was quiet,
but inside I said, "perhaps." It has been raining
all night. Summer rain. The liveliness of it keeps
me awake. I am so happy to have lived.

I began searching in my own writing to make the connection Gregg makes as she leaps in her poetry from the issue to her inspiration. I often find myself saying “perhaps” at the ends of poems. The word symbolizes a reflection on the part of the speaker to an inner susceptibility. It has been raining all night. Summer rain. She is so happy to have lived.

I treasure many of the poems in *Chosen by the Lion* because Gregg addresses relationships between men and women in very concrete ways that resonate to a higher understanding or at least awareness of love. During the writing of a number of my poems in this collection, I became involved in a relationship. After three years, I feel fortunate for having met this person and having experienced what I am confident was love, beyond Gilbert’s definitions of passion or desire. I call these poems my “Mikel poems,” and they are some of the best I have written. In a fiction writing workshop, a professor once told the class about one of his fellow writers who called him in the middle of the night explaining how his marriage was ending and how he had been depressed for months. Before he hung up the phone, he said at least he was writing some great poems. Even though my relationship is over, I am able to use moments from those

three years to establish connections, to assess love in real terms, and, finally, to flesh out my notions about the great fires.

I can not express enough how I want to explore love in simple ways. I want my poetry to speak volumes through simple scenarios of the everyday. To work from the microcosm to the macrocosm. Like William Carlos Williams in his poem "This is Just To Say," contemporary poets are presenting conflicts in spare, familiar settings. Williams writes

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

The poem immediately sets up the issue. The speaker has eaten the plums. Then, the conflict,

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Finally, Williams presents the crux of the poem, a reflection, or stepping back from the scene to say,

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

I strive to follow this same process in my poetry. I present the scene and through it I consider the source of my inspiration.

Louise Glück does this. From her Pulitzer Prize-winning volume of poetry *The Wild Iris*, "The Garden" encapsulates sadness through her observation of a young couple planting peas. It reads,

They cannot see themselves,
in fresh dirt, starting up
without perspective,
the hills behind them pale green, clouded with flowers—

Then,

Look at her, touching his cheek
To make a truce, her fingers
Cool with spring rain;
In thin grass, bursts of purple crocus—

even here, even at the beginning of love,
her hand leaving his face makes
an image of departure

and they think
they are free to overlook
this sadness.

How many others have tried to say this exact thing but have failed because they overwrote? My objective in this collection of work and in future poems is to present the ordinary, like Glück's couple planting peas and, through these images, address a larger issue. It may seem a simple task, but the poet has to take into consideration her

audience. Will the scene presented make the connection for the reader? Each new poem is an instance that the poet hopes the audience will feel the same emotions created within her.

During graduate school, my ways of thinking about poetry changed in addition to my ways of writing about poetry. I credit the Romantics with my new philosophy behind poetry. They compared the external life with the internal life. Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" was not an external landscape; it was a delving into the internal self to reveal the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" and to let imagination *become* the poet. "Tintern Abbey" is a discovery of the mind.

Keats describes the superiority of art over life in *Ode on A Grecian Urn* as imagination transcending all else—the realistic—as it becomes the true genius of the poet. It is important to note that the relationship between the bride and the speaker in *Grecian Urn* is never consummated. Similarly, Keats's poem and some of the poems within the following collection capture a single moment that makes the love immortal, yet the love is not truly experienced since it is captured within the art and cannot be changed. The beauty within these poems is the permanent anticipation, the eternal desire.

Finally, Blake presents his "Marriage of Heaven and Hell," through which he extends his "perilous path" between spiritual and instinctual life. I often compare the path to a cat walking along a railing of a porch. I find myself usually on this edge when I write poems. A poet connects the everyday with something larger. The Romantics reestablished a foundation of imagination in reality originally built by the early lyric poets such as Horace and Sappho. Whereas contemporary poets influenced my predilection to *write*, the Romantics shaped my penchant to *feel*, and to manifest those feelings, first.

This collection of poems follows in the footsteps of the Romantics who believed that what was important was to study the journey that would eventually lead to discoveries about life. These poems contain stories from a particular heart, yet each poem attempts through these images to address a larger issue. I envision the collection as a handful of wildflowers. Not wildflowers in the sentimental sense. Flowers from a side road—some probably weeds—gathered together, each representing a different phylum or genus of love. Here, in the following collection, the possibilities of interdependence—how each kind of love interweaves—are shown through an actual life.

In Dreams

I talk with my father the day after he dies,
With his stitched wrists, black suit, all of it.
I ask him why he cheated on my mother,
Why on weekends he came back
To take me to the knife museum.
We looked at old knives.
We ate sandwiches at the bird sanctuary,
No birds ever came there.

He asks me if it's raining,
If the air smells of exhaust.
I always clasp his cold hands and tell him
It's gray, windy, and smells of
Weeds cut new that day.

My father isn't dead yet.
There's still no haven for wild birds.
Ravens pop like fireworks on power lines,
Fall to the edge of highways.
I'm anxious to describe the sky to him.

The Omega

The woman watched wolves behind her home
Weave through packed snow like farmers
Drawing crop circles in white corn.

She wanted to be them, so she sewed layers of fur together,
Black and gray, and shaved pieces of yellow glass
From her parents' stained glass table into sharp teeth.

She went to his house, howling
And yelping phrases she had no idea what they meant.

She cavorted on his shoveled lawn in the night air,
Her cold breath chasing her tail.

He awakened, lit the sun-spilling lamp, stood at the door,
Watching her strip off her suit,
Layers of black fur wilting on the grass spiked with ice.

She flung her teeth in the air. Her weak body,
Covered in only a black turtleneck, she shivered,

Sweat dripping off her fingers, warming the frozen dew.
He looked at her.

You're a psychopath, he said to the woman.

Perhaps, she thought,
as she stood in the yellow meteor shower.

Stained Glass

My sister and I toy with going
back to Atlanta to see the big house,
to line the rooms up to our memories
and see if they fall through.

I want to look inside the basement again,
where our parents sat opposite
each other, cutting and soldering
textured aqua, brown, and cherry glass

for pictures of perfect nature,
smiling eagles, grapes forming an exact V.

Heather has the screech owl,
Mom kept the fat cat in an oval
on a window leading to her attic.

The nativity scene is packed somewhere,
like my parents' china,
baby Jesus's head out of crimson marble.

Mine, six red tulips, smashed one by one each time I moved,
but no one ever asks about them, or any of it,

like flowers that wilt and die on the kitchen table,
families eating supper around an empty vase.

A Story About Rain

At dinner I asked my dad,
What were the best days of your life?
He answered right after they married,
in the army, couple bridge nights.

I went home to tell my mom this,
a surprise for her like worms
in my kid hands with black potting soil
trailing behind me on my calves, on the carpet,
from the stone steps of her newly-planted garden.

Soon after that, she told me,
my mom and dad packed the three of us
in our station wagon to deliver newspapers
in the mornings to pay bills.

We ate cereal out of plastic sandwich bags,
round and peach with flecks of red.
My brother stuck his tongue
through the holes in the middles.
We sat in the floorboards

as rain dripped inside cracked windows
onto vinyl seats, onto my mother, the warmest.
Glass fogged around her. My father drove
with one stiff arm on the steering wheel.
The other pulled rain into his hair.

Morning Song

alone a good woman
awakes in the night

does she feel it
like hunger

her husband dying
in his easy chair

the garden looks nice
she'd have told him

I hum in the mornings
for you

Early Spring

The last night I saw you it rained.

I wish I knew the names of the flowers
You watched crawl up my shoulders
With shiny beads on strings of my sweater.

Calendula, I pretend, their shape like a fetal woman
Freshly bathed in fine, lavender soap

Nicer than the kind my family buys for my grandmother,

Or something like *Angelica*, hinting at a spirituality
Greater than either of us that night.

After you hit me,
I'd like to know what I called them, those flowers,

Quiet regathering of myself

Off the ground with other brushwood and pine needles.

For Mikel

Your family dyed Easter eggs with comic strips
because you had no money for
rabbit ear-shaped cups
with yellow and blue pellets
to mix with vinegar.

You never looked at me, told the story
to the Sunday newspaper
stuck to our naked bodies in my bed.

That's when you started to love me,
wrapping comics around my fingers
to show how it worked
with spit and holding.

The Ritual

My sister and I, with patchouli in crystal bowls,
pray to the love goddess, a plastic Barbie cake topper.

We take off our training bras, slipping them through
the sleeves of our shirts, lay them in front of her,
sacrificial white lambs.

We sprinkle cinnamon over candles,
sparks through the basement
we sneaked into to do this.

Our nipples stiffen, our cheeks flush,
I take off my shirt first, then her,

We chant *Please bring us good ones that stay forever.*

Light fills the room. It's our older brother.
My sister and I, two deer in headlights.

But he flips off the lamp, heads up the staircase,
saying, The cat's not here, Mom,
he's gone somewhere else.

Summer Thunderstorms

My mother broke a plastic spoon
On my brother's backside
For leaving his plate of spaghetti
On the deck. After raining,
I watched the pasta curl
Along wood planks
And collapse almost to the glass doors.
I imagined the noodles
Like parents screaming at my father
Who swallowed their children,
Never looking up from his plate
At my brother hopping around,
The two pieces of spoon,
Or rain dripping through his fork
On all the rooms of his house.

Lover

Pushing its body through
to sit on the windowsill,
the cat holed
a square opening
in my bedroom blinds,
level to the edge of my mattress
and a keyhole for night
to look in on me,

leg bent, yellow gown
bunched to my chin,
eyes over
Kate Chopin's
A Night in Acadie.

I thought of you
collecting lilies like
the child in the story,
offering them to me
outside, on wet grass,
the streetlight giving you up.

Linseed Oil

Our relationship over,
we stood in his driveway
in January heat.
What were we to do then?

He resumed yard work,
spraying his house with linseed oil,
soaked into dried pine strips
turned orange by sun.

I wiped the oil off my forehead,
through the scent of metal, grass
and seed I scrubbed the windows,
we worked together
for the rest of the afternoon.

When I found a splinter,
he came to me,
turned my hand over
like a shell on a beach,
rubbed oil into my palm.

It seemed as though
we were on the coast again,
two topless women
stopped to take our picture,

we smiled, through oil and sweat—
it was almost the same,
except when I touched him,
his arm felt cooler.

His Mother

I crouch in the corner of Mike's dark house.
His mother tells him she's dying.
I want to be completely still, even not breathing,
Like a hat rack or a flue to the wood stove.
Even better I want to be in first grade again,
Dreaming I can crawl on top of my desk,
Curl into a fetal position and sleep. Wake up
Safe in my bed. Escape the silence,
The drip of the faucet, the word Invasive that hits
In my mind like Mike's knees on the wood floor.
I am more real at this moment than I have ever been.
A full presence of health, rosy cheeked and sparkly eyed.
Tonight I will kiss her son, the dirty kind with tongues
While she sits alone, my grief personified.
She'll forever stain me, like the bruises leaves make
On the ground when they fall and are blown away.

Spectator

Tonight the trees are deep green
Like my mother's sweat suit,
Dark and worn,
Chasing my sister's first
Lover down the driveway.

My brother tags behind her,
Dragging his sky blue blanket,
Sucking his withered, raisin thumb.

I sit on the steps of our house
Watching how the moon reaches
Between branches and low clouds,

Creating images:
Buffalo running through hearts,
The great wind blower
Charming my sister's hair.

The Yellow Room

Nights I was sick
My father, methodically,
As if on a gear,
Handed me tissues
From the bedside
Like counting ghosts
From the box to my face.

I lay on my chest,
Curled in black curls,
Smelling his man breath,
Lifting my head every few
Minutes to feel
For the rim of his glasses
Against my scalp

To make sure he was still there,
Like a sighted person groping
In a dark hallway
For the corner of a picture frame,
A sigh of relief,
This is where I'm supposed to be.

Black Oranges

Candles shaped like oranges
along the wood railing of the beach house,
sectioning the horizon line, I light them.

I am trapped in my crib, I can't be more than three.
My mother holds an orange slice under my nose
in late August just before my brother's birthday.
Here, breathe in, she says.

When my father looks at me he sees
my mother in blue faded overalls,
white eyelet scarf tied over her hair.

One summer she taught us how
to melt marshmallows from clothes hangers at Mud Beach,
how mallard families swim in formation,
bobbing their heads to an invisible drum.

Lighting candles on this white deck in Delaware,
with my father who can't look at me for long,

am I burning my family, what I know of us?
Burning a distinct line between yellow and sky?

Citrus drips over white railing, hardens on the screened porch
where my father reads his fishing books,

My brother juggles white/red buoys—
his spitting image crunching on ice—

My father can't look at him, either.

South Street

In hot after-noon
I breathed the air of the tattoo parlor
Like licorice
Turning the inside of my brain black.

A red-haired German woman
Affixed Love to my shoulder blade.

I will always be reminded
What keeps me here,

Trying to find the sound
In hissing leaves
Or in a car over a rainy street

The sound you make when I touch
Your face in the morning.

Aggie's Brown Button

I think of myself as Aggie with her brown button,
Clicking it between her teeth along Aunt Cindy's kitchen floor.

She pucks it from under the china hutch
that wobbles when Matthew slams the front door.
Why does she keep up with it? Why do I

Answer the telephone at seven in the morning
When I know that only he, dropping his mother at work,

Calls me that early to ask what I'm doing,
To laugh at my hoarse night voice?

Aggie can't explain to me why she lunged and poked,
Groped for the button off Cindy's work dress all afternoon
While the rest of us popped grapes and lay in the hammock.

When she reached it, pulled out from under the cherry wood,
She pranced triumphantly through the hall, the button in her
mouth

Like a mouse, a rabbit, a fat Yellow-Bellied Titfinch.

Night Vision

Lying on the bedroom floor
With Major and Bennie,
I decide cats think in sexual terms.

Their eyes, fire laden,
Define the feeling I want
Again, without Mike.

Each night my orange cats scratch
My Battenburg lace bed skirt,
And I yell and throw pillows at them.

Perhaps they are writing in Braille—
Picks from their claws
Spell out my sexual history
Along the edges of the bed like an occult circle:

Watch. As the men come in
Her soul leaves, slithering out the front door
To wait on the curb
For the one who doesn't love her.

Tribal Woman

The first night I wanted to replace him,
To shift him backwards out of my brain
Like the L-shaped move of the knight into the last row,
I met another man chiseled in much the same way as
Mike, living with the girl whose eyes were
Spilled water on a glass table.

The first thing he said to me was
You look like one of those Miami women,
I said why, and he said because
Your toenails match your sky blue sweater.

I remembered the specials on tribal women
With large plates stuck between their lip and chin,
Their hair wrapped in huge turbans.
Or the ones with brass rings stacked up their necks.

I remembered going topless with Mike,
How he drizzled wet sand onto my breasts
The way my mother used to make towers
On sandcastles for our plastic Godzillas.

I told this new man I wasn't like the girls in Miami.
I wanted to streak paint across my face,
Dance rain dances that break humid weather.
I wanted to be back on the beach with my mother
In a ruffled bikini. I wanted this man
To stop taking my hand, wanted Mike to feel me
Crashing onto him like a hurricane.

The Door Shuts, and I Sit

In the middle of my white bed,
The center of the crocheted flower,
In late afternoon darkness.

He bounced my head off the
Thick, feathery blanket
When we played.
Once I bit my tongue,
Bittersweet, like slurping
Raspberries off a steel beam.

I can't explain the difference
Between pain. Physical,
A body aching after touch,
Or the other kind, when one is empty.

Morning After

Orange cat licks her knees
bobbing out of lukewarm water,
it is his tongue.
White layer of soap is his body.

Naked, she watches her cats
eat full bowls, lap new water
he poured them before leaving.

Lying in white sheets
while gold and green eyes (he won over)
stare up at her, she rests.
Her body alone,
like the last clean spoon.

Shopping For Angelfish

You said we acted like newlyweds
kissing against stacked aquariums
along the back wall of the store.

You licked me and the glass
where fish tangled in
green plastic webs.

They gulped you inside themselves
as I gulped you for hours and hours.

This was before you wound
my key off your key ring
and dropped it into the aquarium.

I watched for hours
as bubbles rose to the top
to join the rest of the air.

I Named My Fish Insomnia

With you I never slept
But lay awake wondering
About the hot or cold of the room, or

What my mother would say
At the door, watching
You grip the edge of my T-shirt—

Underneath, me open slick and bare
Like a freshly peeled kiwi
In the morning sea green light.

Tonight I'd trade for it all back—
The sleeplessness—
Counting the times your eyes
Flutter in rest like deep water.

Upstream

You're with her at the lake,
water high for summer,
rain stirring up
milky, burnt orange.

I imagine you're fishing, maybe.
baiting her hook
with your chilled minnows.

Do you remember
biting the baby trout in half,
winding my hook through,
white scales in your tongue
like curse words in front of children?

You said you wouldn't do it again.

While You Were Out

I didn't answer the phone when you called,
just let it ring

like a child practicing phonetics,
"there" and
"this way"
and "the"
and "the."

I didn't make lists of why
you needed me after all this time,
no reasons for your sudden
wanting.

Maybe you got down to the lake again,
it was high from rain,
and you thought of me,
bent backwards like a bridge,
my hands sunk into mud
at the edge of the water,

your hands lifting my waist
for an ocean liner to pass under us.

Daydreaming

As the woman with black braids,
Slipping with silk ease under her arms,
Cuts the duck into small pieces,
Rolls it in dough like pale faces,

Runs plum sauce, Heather's hair,
With a spoon down the flesh of the pancake,
I know we all wait

In this interminable moment,

For tastes of crunchy skin,
For sesame on tips of tongues,

For your eyes at the end of the hallway to recognize me,
Irises lighting a purple fire.

No milk to cool my inside part that covets you.
When my fortune cookie says *Patience is your virtue*,
I trade with my little brother for his:
Accept the next proposal you hear.

I rub pepper juice below my eyes
In long streaks like the black on a football player's face
Hiding from the sun, all the hot places I can't reach.

When she's at your house in summer evenings,
I scrape your initials with fireflies, their glowing ash,
Stealthily down your sidewalk,
Neither of you aware of me,

A simmering pepper on the plate edge.

Indian Summer

I love you more now
than I did when the
hump inside my covers
shifted along the
fault line between us.

I'm left with the good
memories of you,
shiny slug trails
I trace with my toe.

When I'm frying chicken,
you sneak up on me still,
your face dark
against evening sunlight.

Though now you don't offer
to slice tomatoes or squash,
your hand the harvester of
green and brown seeds

washed out of my hair,
off the tops of my feet
in the cool shower
at dusk.

Visitor

He came today to take back his red shorts,
Rolled three times below my belly,
Touching my bare skin.

I lay on the mauve carpet like a dinner course,
Flounder with hollandaise or something,
Waiting for him, pretending to struggle.

He dove into me, licking the backsides of my teeth,
Twisting with his kneading hands the cotton pockets
Pulled down to my knees, ankles, off.

We spun locked together along the floor
Until I said, I'm not doing this again.

I spent the rest of the day smelling my hands,
Pawing through the air to shoo him out,
Dog in the house of the white hens.

Leaving the Dogs

We drove the dogs to the kennel
before leaving for Rehoboth Beach
in mid-July, wind from the window
blew the whites of our bare, tan nails.

Inside, gray and dingy cages
held dishwater and black dogs
clawing to get out,
they sniffed my sister's legs
as she passed.

Later, in the back seat,
she asked, Why do we have to leave them there?
Tears down her baby fat cheeks.

I wanted to tell her
this pain, this urge to go back,
kneel beside one of them and give in—
this is only the beginning.

Indian Summer 2

For fifteen years
Johnny brought my mother
homegrown squash and tomatoes
left loose on the kitchen table
like kindergarteners.

What was this offering?

When he came for dinner,
she cooked in a tank top with no bra,
her nipples ripe as the vegetables.

Her hands damp from the sink
brushed across my face,
she called me Love.

Doing Salmon Justice

No one can capture the inexplicable beauty of the salmon who
run up shore to mate.

Jogging yesterday I thought how hard it must be for them, the
salmon, the sperm, all the up-streamers.

Salmon love is extinct. People say Sex today, replacing
daffodils, those lusty, fecund pollen pushers open to the earth.

Lovers need to make the journey, because along the way they're
Going to find pieces of green glass

On the ground, and a tow truck guy named Jerry, and the
woman will get glass in her feet.

The man will ask Jerry for a cloth—striped with oil,
but the couple won't care—

He'll wipe blood off her feet and it will be worth it.

Talisman

This is my love spell for you. It is not cumin or sandalwood or saffron. Nor is it the single bay leaf in my father's chili or the penny in my mother's caramel cake. You gave me a silver toe ring antiqued with the word LOVE in a yellow heart-shaped box with a lavender ribbon. I didn't wear it until summer, after you were gone, but it broke somewhere between the O and V. When I returned it to the store, the counter man made me describe you so he would believe you bought it from him and that he owed me another one. I gave him a dry, physical description of your body and hair, and he remembered you. So he gave me a replacement. Walking down the street, a strong scent of burnt coffee in the air, I cast a spell on you. I said, as the ring sparkled in the afternoon sun, Bring him to my window tonight, tapping for me again, and make him want me like I'm still a virgin, not yet tagged like the ear of a cow.

Malice

I sat on my couch
before I did anything.

Then I went into my bathroom
and killed a spider
with the corner of a book.

I thought
This is what you did.

It's as though
I've become a murderer,
dumping bodies in

dark suburban underbrush.

I will kill you in me
wiping green blood off my knees
and white tile.

One Last Question

If you and I were birds
stuck in a cage together

with seed and mirrors
our only other company,

would you confess to me the truth—
that you never loved me—

because you had no one else to tell?

Ferryman

Some days you haven't slept with the rough voiced women.
You've come home early to me and rubbed up my shins
like a cat wanting cream.

Our love-making is only, singular, quilted to pale blue love
sessions of last week and yesterday, when your sweat dripped
into my eyes, blinding me.

There is no woman like Priscilla, snaking up your walkway:
an S, an S again. Brazilian women sway all the time,
they cavort while choosing melons.

You left two socks stuffed inside themselves, brown edges like
done crust, a tarnished steel bracelet under my cotton panties,
one pair of your boxers.

I wear these things to bed under the blowing fan in case I don't
wake up, in case you're waiting to take me to
a magenta fire that's real,

you've only been the first taste of an ending.

Woman Frantic With Loss

On her porch
she snaps her beans

inside she imagines
there are no beans,
only pods,

hollow skins open
to a gutted, dried wasteland
where the beans should be.

She shakes her head into
a reflection of sour eyes,
a half-dropped mouth,

as she snaps to fill
the stainless steel bowl.

Breakfast Man

I used to try to dream falling dreams
Down stairs or over white-capped mountains
So I could wake, safe in my bed,
Gentle breathing of my cat on my face.

I wanted that security
When I never landed, my bones long and unbroken
From crashing in valleys or at the foot of basement steps.

Now when a couple embraces,
August heat rising thick as oil under their arms,
I hold my eyes open and watch,

Wait to awaken not alone
Like a single tree,

Awaken when he says
Look at this new light,
Slipping off the leaves and falling.

Paradise

A man nibbled rotund figs
bleeding syrupy juice
of late season
out of a paper sack
in the parking lot of
Fern's Fresh Produce.

I thought of the backyard fig trees
of my grandmother's
sea foam green house
with unlocked screen doors
opened to air
on Magnolia Street.

Let nothing scare her

Like moonlight against
the knife blade
beneath her window—
squares of light
bounding off the undersides
of stiff tree leaves—

Let him not get in.

The Reapers

Our old Siamese beat
Mom's bedroom door
his voice like a church bell
until she slung him
to the gray yard.

Next morning, I found him dead,
mouth open, eyes wide,
watching dark cats
carry his soul to the yard's edge
farther, beyond the willow tree.

Mom went to church after that,
I won't fear death angels when I die, she said.

I thought
I don't want my feet bare, like our cat's,
his white toes up from the grass, unpicked cotton.

Praise the Dogwoods

Praise the dogwoods'
open openness, gorged news, pink centers.
fat baby fingers tipped
with blobs of thick batter.

Maybe Heaven is forward, walking longer
through flesh-colored gates of flower trees
instead of up.

Praise the dogwoods who say
Not this time
to winter,
the way I said to the man
I pelted with chocolate marshmallows
for skirting around,
You're not having me again.

Dogwoods claim the trails,
clomping in creamy platform shoes.
People will come in droves
to watch breasts fall out of their
ivory schoolgirl sweaters.

Praise the dogwoods I clip,
twist together, and place
in my bottle blonde hair.

Bye Bye

One morning
I ran over a blackbird.
Thought it would move,
But it didn't.

I watched in my rearview mirror
As the other blackbird
Wobbled over to it,
Bent its head down
To whisper to the dead bird,

As if to ask
Are you okay?

I imagine some mornings
I ask myself
The same question.

Are you okay?

When I say no,
The happy part takes over,

I say,
As the blackbird flew
To join the others,

Then, let me go ahead
And live for you.

Summer People

It's Uncle Lee's beach house
I forget to write about.

I often dream I'm there—

my mother is at the end of
a long, board walkway.

She sits in a chair,
her burgundy legs
soaking the afternoon.

This is when I have no breasts,
but knobs below thin straps of my suit.

She kicks sand with painted toes
and smiles when I reach her,

I'm holding out a weed
saved from a sand dune

because it had buds
like white flakes of broiled fish.

Lighthouses

I must have been to one when I was a young girl.

Beaches go inside my body where words aren't—
I can't make my mouth speak their encompassing.

Perhaps I'm waiting for a man coming back from a sea,
Flaubert would love me—

Strands of my hair thick from salt, blowing around my face
In wild tentacles.

I wear nothing, ready for him,
When he gets here, I'm holding out my hand

Like a clear yellow light over the water,
I say, Join me. Join me.

Choosing a Husband

I want only the man who can explain to me why I find glitter
paint on speedboats so beautiful,

I want none of the traditional house, except the chocolate
Labrador whom I will name Holiday

And explain mysteries away to his ears. In love, from now on, I
want only flowers under arms

In thick, glass vases, so heavy I risk dropping them on the floor.
And that would be enjoyable

Watching glass mix with stems and buds of purple heartsease
and white pansies.

Thesis

Can I write a poem
Curved and seduce like
Stoneware clay on a potter's wheel
Fired in a kiln
With crunchy, clear glaze
To end my quest for what love is?

Can't this poem be the heron
Outside the window at breakfast
The whole family watches
A freeze frame of life?

Can a man in an alcove
Feed off the moon
Flaxening the streets
Like an old woman's hair?

Do I need to burn my hands on the fires?

In the Sandbox

Dusk beginning,
my young mother yells from the house
Put your hands in front of your face,
can you see your own hands?

I squint, hold up my fingers,
pieces of apricot Crayons,
I can barely see them or the clouds anymore.

On my last day I imagine it will be the same
when I can't find my hands in the dark
and must come in.

VITA

Kristin Robertson was born in Alexandria, Virginia in 1975. Her family moved to Atlanta, Georgia and eventually to Chattanooga, Tennessee, which is where she still considers home. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree with a concentration in writing from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in 1997. During graduate school at UT, she was a John C. Hodges Graduate Poetry Prize recipient and a guest reader in the Writers in the Library series. After earning her Master of Arts degree, she plans to return to Atlanta, live close to her sister and brother, and share an apartment with her two cats. One day she hopes to live on a beach and write poems about lighthouses and ocean and seagulls she once knew.