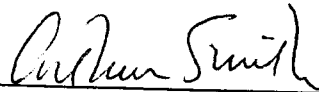


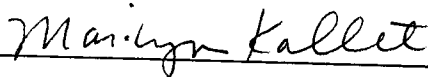
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Date

April 29, 1992

COMMON GROUND

A Thesis

Presented for the

Masters of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Melissa Paige Ball

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To My Parents And Grandparents

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ABSTRACT

Organized by a narrative impulse, this thesis explores the universal aspects of human existence by focusing on the cycles of life and death and through relating memory, change and survival to these larger themes. The natural imagery of water or storms, seasonal cycles, lunar cycles, human physical cycles, animals and gardens recur throughout the manuscript and act as metaphors by which insights into the relationship between beauty and death, memory and survival are reached. Other equally important aspects of this work include its multiple views of human relationships from communication breakdown between parents and children to the individual's acceptance of the self.

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INTRODUCTION

1

For most people the hardest part of writing is facing the blank page in front of them that calls for words. For me, the hardest part of writing comes not in the moments before the first words hit the page but in the instant after they are written, when the euphoria of creating gives way to the realization that the offspring of one's imagination is in need of revision.

Although I agree with Wordsworth's axiom that poetry should originate in a spontaneous overflow of emotion, often that original emotion can be misleading, particularly if the poet concentrates only on that feeling and attempts to take the poem in a direction it does not wish to go. In my own theory of prosody, reflection and revision become important elements in the writing process. I am not saying that my own work lacks spontaneity. The poetry is spontaneous in that I let it take its own direction without allowing my own feelings to interfere. For me, the act of writing then becomes the act of reconstructing memory and discovering insight. My writing often leads me in unexpected directions, and when I fight against that pull, the language becomes rhythmically dead, the insight blurs. But while spontaneity initiates the creative process, revision inevitably follows.

The acts of writing and revision are born from an impulse toward rhythm and cycle. A cycle of creating and recreating is reflected in this collection of poetry and fiction. I have arranged the poetry sections in a non-traditional manner. Most poetry collections I have read by other students are organized under a linear narrative principle beginning with their earlier work and progressing to their most recent work. The thematic scheme behind this organization is a journey motif beginning in darkness or immaturity and ending with light and insight. The problem with this organizing principle is that it presupposes a finality in the creative process. The possibility for further insight is lost. I have taken a different approach to organization. My sections move from my most recent poems, where insight into life is sharpest, back to my earlier work where I struggle to articulate my perception of the world.

The opening section of poetry, Autumn Sketches, as the name implies, consists primarily of my more recent poetry. These poems are autobiographical in nature. They explore themes that unify this collection as a whole--rhythmic cycles in nature, survival, change, the reconstruction of memory, the relationship between beauty and death. These themes are explored through the primary metaphor of seasonal cycles. The influences of Charles Wright,

C.K. Williams and Phillip Levine can be found in this section and throughout the entire manuscript. Wright's and Levine's reconciliation of beauty and death through imagery have perhaps had the most profound influence on the poem "Autumn Sketches." This poem combines elements of both writers. Wright's quiet approach to and acceptance of the immediate moment that culminates in letting go of the self is juxtaposed with Levine's reconciliation of the urban and the natural, of beauty, death and survival.

The second section, Common Ground, bridges the gap between present and past. It is indeed "common ground" in that it is made up of both old and new work, poems which are transitional in nature, poems which explore memory and its influence on the reality of the present. The primary theme of this section is the human condition. These are poems that once again turn to imagery of rhythmic cycles in nature--water and storm, lunar cycles, the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Their main focus lies on various views of human relationships from the breakdown in communication between parents and children to miscommunication between lovers, and finally, to an understanding of the self in relation to other human beings. These poems face reality head on and without looking away. The primary influence on this section is the work of poet C.K. Williams. His tendency to reconcile beauty

and reality is present in almost all of the poems in this section. The final poem in this section, "The Chimneys," reflects the cyclical order of the entire manuscript.

The final section, Early Spring, consists of my earlier work. This poetry laid the foundation for the insights which follow in my later work. They are poems of survival, poems about the individual's struggle to accept life and find joy in it despite emotional hardship. These poems are a mix of reality and dreamwork. They are the beginning of my creativity. I arranged my manuscript in such a way as to emphasize the rhythmic, cyclical nature of the poems throughout the work. The themes recur again and again which creates a feeling of rebirth and allows for the possibility of finding further insight by returning to the beginning of one's creative roots and moving forward.

The short story, "Gambling By The Light Of The Storm," is a product of this "returning" to beginnings in more than one way. I got the idea for the story from my own experience as a child growing up in a southern family. Dona McClaine's character is based closely on my memories of my grandmother, Dona McClaine Ball. The short story, while able to stand on its own, is intended as an opening chapter for a longer piece, a collection of autobiographical stories. The prose completes the rhythmic cycles of the poetry. It creates a common ground between present and past.

POETRY

AUTUMN SKETCHES

AUTUMN SKETCHES

From the south comes the last
warm breeze of October, rustling
the un-cut grass, blades waving
like strings of plastic streamers

outlining used car lots
off the highway or,
with the sunlight on them,
hundreds of sparklers burning gold.

Above me, the clear, blue ceiling
of autumn gathers clouds
along the hillside near
the giant refinery drums streaked with rust.

Here I am, lying in this grassy circle,
surrounded by brick apartment buildings.

The closest appears two-dimensional,

its flat surface lined with windows
and, below them, air-conditioning grates,
clothes hanging from curtain rods.

My own window frames

the industrial side of town--
oil refinery and abandoned warehouses
in the distance.

From that vantage, I can see

the public swimming pool--
covered, plastic molded to its sides,
the hole open and black--

a pool someone else will look down on
next fall, hanging curtains,
sizing up space for furniture,
learning to accept this view

as I've been learning,
and the hardest lesson--
without wanting more,
without being afraid.

MELTON HILL

Somewhere across the lake,
the whirr of a chain saw
echoes most of the day--

someone clearing brush
for kindling fires
on cool evenings--

In a week they'll be ready to burn,
dry wood and curled leaves
popping from the heat.

It is good to be here
sitting in a lawn chair,
taking in the warm breeze

of early autumn, watching the cat--
its long, muscular body
stretched against

the baseboard of the red-stained
porch railing, its white belly
angled toward the sun.

ROCKCLIMBING

I climb the bank, sit along
its grassy edge and dangle
my feet, eyes scanning the bluffs.

Across the river, rockclimbers cling to the cliffs--
a woman reaches down
to pull a man over a steep

ledge where they rest together
before continuing up the rock face.
They carefully place feet,

finding outcrops for handholds,
finding leverage enough to balance
against the rough slope. From my vantage

the climb appears effortless--
the couple, like dancers,
moving with grace on their sides--

I can not see their faces
twisted and strained from the ascent,
their knuckles white from holding on.

STARVED ROCK STATE PARK

We park and get out,
sharp wind reminding me
northern Decembers
are less than mild.

In gloves and boots
borrowed from your mother,

I fight the urge
to complain, to return

to the car and the heater,
or go back to Tennessee

away from this arguing.

We look out over the mountain

at trees, limbs bare, crooked,
our breath suspended in air,

and huddle together like the couples
emerging from the lodge,

surprised to find comfort
in the folds of each other's coats.

ANNIVERSARY

If this is what it means to grow old,
then I want to age quickly,
skip the years of arguing,
struggling with money, raising children
and come to our thirty-fifth year together,
like your parents who sit before us now,
so comfortable with each other that they do not mind
not spending time alone. They entertain us
with stories about their engagement--
how they once went six months without speaking,
how they are buying their first house,
after all these years of marriage,
like a couple just starting out.
They exchange cards without ceremony,
make a toast, kiss across the table.
By now they have become second nature to each other,
the years of alternating happiness and pain
having brought them this far.

ATHENS GREECE ON MY FIFTEENTH BIRTHDAY

It could have been,
for all its regularity,
a room at a Holiday Inn in Tennessee--
textured walls, thin gold and green lines
running vertically down beige paper,
the standard orange carpet,
two double beds with multicolored spreads,
headboards screwed into sheetrock.

It turns out some things, like cheap hotels,
are the same all over the world.

At my age, life was romantic, right down
to the room's broken air-conditioner.

I slept in the bed closest to the window,
felt the heat collected by the city's whitewashed walls
seeping through curtains, evening bringing little relief.

All I could do was strip down
and sleep sprawled on the bed.

I looked out at a clear, dark sky past the roof
of a neighboring building, the sharp stars
promising another night without rain,
humidity rising, caterwauling in the alley.

SLEEPING ALONE

A rumbling clank,
The 3 a.m. train passes outside
My window, laying waste
To the night's silence.
Some nights this sound sings
Me to sleep, but this morning's
Train shakes the house.

I stare at the ceiling fan
Moving in circles above me.
Listen to stillness return--
A chill like the breeze
Made by the fan evaporating
this summer morning's moisture
from my body.

CICADA

I almost step on it
as we hurry from
your apartment to make
an afternoon meeting,
you pulling me forward.
By chance I look down,
see the insect, its large head
metallic green like the paint
on a Volkswagon.
Its wings, as I flip it over--
like stained glass,
thick and heavy-looking--sound brittle,
like a dead leaf being crushed.
They buzz against asphalt,
white underside flashing
brilliant in the sunlight,
its legs working the air
for a hold with which it might
right itself again.

FULL MOON AT DAWN

At four-thirty, driving alone
 only for the sake
of killing the slow hours until work,
 I follow the moon
full and white against the dawn sky.

Along the river,
 white-marbled bluffs
appear and disappear
 on the northern shore,

fog hangs thick above the grass
 smearing the outlines of three oaks
clustered at the water's edge.

I think of sitting at that spot,

my own body as blissful as those trees--
 that emptiness, not death but more like
driving past work towards Nashville or Memphis,
 at last out of love with the self,
in love with nothing in particular.

LETTER TO A FRIEND IN SAN FRANCISCO

The Japanese garden spreads for miles,
cherry trees blossom in the mild
California winter and line the walkways
where you stroll for hours, or sit in the shade
writing me of the beauty around you.

I imagine the garden like a Monet,
bridges spanning the lily-covered water,
at first bright with yellow and white flowers,
and then later, as his eyesight failed,
purple and green fading to black.

Because of the lesson in his loss--
to continue to live with memory--
I see how this garden's perfection is cultivated.
The landscaper's arms are scratched from pruning,
her hands callous from pulling weeds.

COMMON GROUND

COMMON GROUND

He chooses a chestnut,
deep burgundy without flaws--

puts it in his mouth,
biting down hard-- sounding out

the loud, brittle crack
of the shell splitting.

I pick one out of the pile,
use my teeth--

and the soft nut gives
into uneven halves.

I peel back skin from yellow pith,
chew the dry thing,

the flavor overpowering,
a gritty film left

on my tongue as I swallow
and smile at my father

who's waiting to see if I will eat
the other half, not minding

when I place it on the counter
and walk back to whatever

I was doing before we met
here in the kitchen,

standing like mirrors
before each other,

sharing in common
this one, simple act.

PLANTING BY THE SIGNS

My father and I drive down Campbell Station Road,
Him rattling on about killing a groundhog
Or something. I'm not listening

Until he mentions that now
Isn't a good time to dig potatoes,
The signs are in the feet,
The potatoes will rot.

I lift my eyes from the passing trees,
Study his face tanned brown with lines,
His voice melting into
The hum of tires, into the
Drone of road noise.

BETWEEN SPEAKING

Putting down her glass of iced tea,
mother waves from the table.

I am taken aback by her thinness,
her neck long, draped in wrinkles.

She's old now at fifty-eight,
but still too young for the heavy lines

formed in her face as it stretches
into a smile for me.

I slide onto the bench opposite her,
the table set between us.

We make small talk--

she does not speak about the surgery,

a tumor removed from her breast,

and I do not ask her how she really feels.

To speak the question would open her blouse--
her imperfect breast left exposed to my fingers

exploring the curve of nylon stitches

holding together skin. I want to ask her if she cried

and why she did not return to work
for three weeks after the surgery.

I want to ask her if she knows
this disease, the word we dare

not speak outloud from fear
of recognition,

can be passed from mother to daughter--
the silence as destructive as the disease.

THE CAT

I notice the cat, yellow and half-dead,
bunched into a tight ball under the rusted pickup.

I reach to stroke her back,
feel the knotted, scabbed skin,

find a raw spot at the base
of her tail where she's chewed at fleas.

At my touch she stretches--
front legs first followed by stiff haunches.

She presses hard against my leg,
rubbing head and nose,

head and nose,
lunging upward to meet my hand

before crouching under the truck,
her movement weaving a greasy, black streak

down the arch of her back.

She will heal herself as cats do,

licking dirt from skin, her saliva a balm,
scars building beneath her fur.

THE FITTING ROOM

In room A, I wait on an older woman
who peers from behind her slated door
for help with buttons down the back of her dress.
Her white hair is set in billowy curls.
This is all I want to notice about her.
I do not want to see her rounding stomach
squeezed in by a girdle. I do not look directly
at her breasts now held high by beige lace,
or even at her face, drawn and wrinkled.

Standing behind her, I can look her reflection in the eye,
so looking isn't the problem, it's seeing her.
She might be me standing there in thirty years
if I make it that long--a young sales associate
at my back fumbling with buttons, her hand brushing
my age-spotted skin and jerking away.
It may be true. No one wants to touch the old,
except perhaps the old. The thought of being alone
more threatening than physical change--
my body growing soft and wild with time.

MEASURES

When tree frogs sing you know it will rain,
even before clouds, low and grey, burst open.

Tonight they sing, I stand under a tree
watching one on a low limb,

his throat expanding like a white balloon,
his skin scaled, cracked, peeling from his body.

The rain falls light and cold around me,
what stops me from going back to the house,

the frog having eaten his skin and the show over
is simply this--I can not understand how it happens,

this taking into oneself of memory rather
than leaving it behind. But I am forever

going back to the same pain, turning it over
in my mind as one handles a prize possession--

looking at all sides without finding fault.

GEORGIA RAIN

We sit on a house deck
overlooking a Georgia river
with low clouds threatening
our plans for late afternoon.

Rain begins to fall in a fine mist,
marring the water's smoothness.

Still we sit on this black,
cast-iron patio furniture
that will leave a woven
pattern on the backs of our legs.

Above me water beads and drops
from dingy, sun-faded mesh.

And here above the water,
the first thunderclap
sends you into the house
without a break in your silence
or a look back at me.

I get up from my own chair,
look over the railing.

Rising several feet
closer towards the house,
brown water churns against the bank,
taking over the monkey grass
planted at the yard's edge.

AFTER A SUDDEN STORM

A streetlight washes
my dark kitchen
in water-color yellow,
water beaded across

the window screen,
dark silver like dew
caught in a spider's web,
without design.

Strange I should notice this
only now, my third trip
to the kitchen for coffee,
gratification, the promise

of darkness outside the storm window,
of your voice not on the line, of being alone.
I cup the mug in my hand,
bend my head to drink,

the steam rising
before the liquid reaches my mouth.

SOUTH CAROLINA COAST

It stormed for two days.
The clouds dark with rain
blew in, clearing the beach
of debris and beachcombers,
leaving the swelling surf.
By noon the third day
people dotted the ocean,
bodies and heads lining
the swells like matches
bobbing up and down,
up and down.

UPON RETURNING HOME FROM MYRTLE BEACH

I am making peace
with myself now
to the tune of crickets,

the belching of tree frogs
hanging onto thin limbs
with knobby, webbed toes.

Standing on the deck,
I breath in the fish smell
of lake water rippled grey

and peach--
colored by the late evening sky--
water barely visible

behind the lattice of trees
with half-eaten leaves
like pieces of lace,

thin and frail and dead.

THE CHIMNEYS

I drove an hour to come here for nothing

but the constant sound of the river's roar--

water-spray dancing off boulders midstream--

and to feel the cool hardness of this stone

which holds me contour for contour,

while I think of nothing, and then in turn,

how scattered buds of early March form

in the lattice of tree limbs leaning from the bank,

how the next mountain frost will kill them back,

and the last deep snowfall will cover the roads--

like the roads we climbed last winter

driving at midnight to Newfound Gap--

snow hanging heavy from limbs,

the wide, dark dome of scattered stars offering

the clarity that comes only from cold--

the sky clear as the meteor showers began,

the stars burning themselves out of sight, one-by-one,

and for an instant, trailing light behind them.

EARLY SPRING

AFTER WORKING EIGHT HOURS AT A DAYCARE

At six, I meet you for dinner,
go on about my day of cleaning noses
and yelling stories. You listen without saying much,
this silence so different from our long,
excited conversations in the months before I took this job.

They are not what you want to discuss,
the children who run me ragged all day
in the nursery, shitting and squalling.

You spread your day's writing out on the table.
I can not show the fruits of my own labor,
lay the children out before you like poetry,
point to the girl who now knows her colors,
the boy who can tie his shoes.

YOUR WEDDING INVITATION

Thick, white paper with gold letters--
smooth cursive, lines flowing like the waves
on Trinity Lake two summers ago,
small white-peaked slopes left in the wake
of my graceless body dragged behind a boat,
while your voice, hoarse from shouting, rang out
over the engine noise useless instructions.
I tried until I was sick, but never got up.
The cold water numbed my legs, resentment
welled in my throat, hard and dry,
until I could think of nothing
but your criticism--scalding words
that took my mind off red, aching skin.
At dusk, the lake's silence chilled me
as we sat together on the boat deck,
searching the timber pines
along the clay bank for conversation--
an occasional deer or stray raccoon
drinking at the water's edge.

UPON CONSIDERING YOUR ABSENCE

Outside my window, the poplar's leaves hang dried and brown.
In my kitchen, dishes balanced in the sink have gone
unwashed for days. I only want to sit at this window,
watch leaves die and pigeons light in the trees,
plump birds leaving grey feathers behind when they fly.
I wait for darkness to fade this room--my shadow cast
at my feet by late-afternoon light.

THUNDERSTORM

The trees give under the wind's touch.

Dark clouds overtake moonlight,

Killing silence with thunder.

Brilliant streaks shred the darkness--
rip open clouds.

The rain finally falls

Cold upon my face, cutting

Like slivers of clear, broken glass.

LOBSTER SOFTBALL AT TRINITY LAKE

In Trinity's dingy, thick water
You played out my nightmare.
I watched in safety
Atop the white-stoned wave breaker
While you swung at softballs,
Dodged giant, snapping claws barely missing you.
Your teammate lost his footing
Along with his arm or leg--
Unidentifiable flesh sinking into the blackness.
Later, two boys' bodies washed dead
Onto the beach where the girls, oblivious,
Continued their game of volleyball,
Feet digging holes in the sand.

SONG OF THE LAUREL COVEN

The women drift up the hillside
Toward the thick grove of laurel
Breathing in their freedom, however brief.
The green shadows whisper to them, shhh
The sky-clouds call to them, shhh
The tall grass sings to them, shhh
I feel myself call to them
As they vanish into the wood.
The laurel calls softly,
I follow her song.

PAINTING THE SHELTER HALLWAYS

The rhythm rubs off
like thick, wet paint
from a wall carelessly brushed against.
It stays with me all day,
soaking deep into the blue fiber
of my shirt, the stain reminding me
when I wear the shirt again of the tune
relentless in my memory.
The same song I labored to,
white-washing walls in the sticky heat
of August in a run-down building
without air conditioning,
paint fumes making me dizzy,
nerves finding a beat of their own.
When the dipping and brushing stops,
I return to one room and a naugahyde sofa,
my sweat beading against its surface,
running in time from my skin
to the moment when I must tear myself away
to shower and sleep, dreaming
of paint fumes, brush strokes, music.

PROSE

GAMBLING BY THE LIGHT OF THE STORM

Dona McClaine sat on her front porch swing peeling potatoes and watching the late-afternoon sky grow dark with thunderheads. She'd heard the cicadas and tree frogs singing in the early morning. A sure sign of rain, she thought, as she took her morning's washing in from the clothes-line in back of her house, shut the windows tight, and began walking the quarter mile to her son and daughter-in-law's home. The family would be watching from the livingroom window to see she made the trip safely. They offered to pick her up time and again, but she always refused, trusting her own legs more than those metal caskets called cars.

The joints of her knees popped and ached from arthritis, but Dona moved forward intent on reaching shelter before the storm hit. She had thought that perhaps this time she would just stay at home and ride it out alone, but the idea of the wind sending a tree crashing through the rusting tin roof and the hard roll of thunder shaking the house was enough to convince her to suffer pain and walk to her son's place.

As she walked, Dona thought about how her husband, Luther, used to hold her hand during the worst parts of the summer storms. Always patient, Luther would tell her about his morning in the field plowing or his selling produce at

the farmer's market, trying to calm her after each booming clap of thunder followed close by lightning. She usually felt embarrassed after the storm passed, telling her husband how ridiculous it was that a grown woman should jump and scream and carry-on the way she did, but ending her declaration by saying that it really couldn't be helped.

One summer she'd almost been killed when lightning ran in through the livingroom window and struck her and Luther's first television set. The television was a beautiful nineteen-inch black-and-white set encased in a solid cherry wood console. They had bought it at Sears and Roebuck Co., carting what Luther sarcastically called "their window to the civilized world" home in a pick-up truck borrowed from their neighbors.

Once in place, Dona had turned it on to watch the evening newscast when the rain began. "You reckon we oughta turn that thing off," Luther had said, leaning forward in his armchair. "It looks like it's gonna come a gully-washer." "Rain ain't gonna hurt that TV none, Pap, now hush so we can hear the weather for tomorrow." Luther settled back into his seat with a sidelong glance at his wife that said he didn't quite agree with her opinion. Dona caught that look and smiled to herself.

She and her husband rarely argued; usually Luther just gave in and saw things her way. He hadn't wanted the TV in the first place, but she talked him into getting it with money they'd saved from the surplus of honey sold that spring. Now she was sitting in her own living room seeing people who lived somewhere far away from her, and Luther wasn't about to make her turn them off because of a little rain. So they sat there watching television without speaking until thunder rumbled in the distance. "Sounds like the storm's movin' closer, Dona. Cain't we turn the TV off now; I've seen enough." "We ain't turnin' nothin' off now lessen I say so," Dona replied, unwilling to acknowledge the concern in her husband's voice. "Well, I'm goin' to bed then," her husband growled, getting up from his chair.

What happened next, Dona thought afterwards, must have been justice upon her for talkin' to Luther so mean. For just as he left the livingroom, thunder crashed over the house and lighting lit the sky a dim yellow. At the same time, the electricity flicked off and the television gave a loud "blam!" Smoke rose from the cabinet. Dona had started with a terrified "hoooot" and screamed for Luther. He stumbled through the dark until he found her huddled on the floor, clutching in her arms a sofa cushion that she

refused to let go even after he had lit a hurricane lamp and convinced her that neither one of them had been hurt.

The next day they had examined the television. Its back panel had been charred black, and burnt wiring poked through the hole left by the lightning. Luther said it was done for, but Dona had insisted on taking it back into town to a repair shop. The young electrician surveyed the damage and shook his head. Luther sold the electrical hardware to him but took the wood cabinet home and used it to build Dona a small trunk to hold her winter quilts.

After Luther died, she had taken the trunk to her son, John, asking him and his wife to keep it safe for her; it reminded her too much of the storm and of Luther. And now, years later when she thought of the trunk and the television, Dona often felt guilty about the hurt her stubbornness must have caused her husband. She had not once admitted to him that he had been right all along about turning off that television, and Luther had never asked her to apologize.

* * * * *

With this in mind, Dona took the last steps up the driveway toward the front door of a white, two story house. Her son's house was large but simple, built from wood

and topped with a tin roof that leaked during hard rains. Her seven-year old granddaughter, Elizabeth-Martin, who had been watching for Dona from the living room window, now let the curtain she was holding aside fall and ran to meet her grandmother at the door.

"Mama, Granny's here," the girl yelled over her shoulder as she opened the front door. "Did you bring me a surprise, Granny?" Dona searched her dress pockets, finding a quarter and a buckeye. She handed them to her granddaughter who snatched them away and ran back into the livingroom.

Elizabeth-Martin's mother peered into the hallway from the kitchen where she was trying to finish dinner before the worst of the storm hit. The smell of meatloaf and greens hung in the foyer. "How does it look outside? Did you get rained on walking over?" "It's bad out, windy, but the rain ain't poured yet," Dona said. "You better get out a that kitchen, though. I heared it thunderen' in the thickets on the way here." "It'll be alright, Granny. We'll eat in a few minutes," her daughter-in-law sang back in an unnaturally bright voice which she intended to calm her mother-in-law, but which only served to reveal her agitation at the old woman's fear. "We go through this every summer," Sharon thought as she spooned food from pans into bowls and set them on the dining room table.

Beginning the year Papaw died, Granny had visited regularly, blowing in and leaving with the late-afternoon summer storms. The visits themselves weren't bad; it was Granny's stubborn insistence that the entire family sit perfectly still with all the lights turned off and the TV unplugged during the bad weather that worried Sharon. And it was a wonder Elizabeth-Martin wasn't terrified of the thunder and lightning, as well, the way her grandmother made such a fuss, jumping and hooting a split-second after a rumble overhead. The child seemed enthralled with the violent weather. Sharon had often heard her daughter tell Granny that the thunder wouldn't hurt her, that it was just God shooting craps with the angels. Sharon didn't know who'd told her that one. In fact, she thought it somewhat sacrilegious, but as long as the story kept Elizabeth-Martin from being scared and Granny preoccupied, she could live with God's gambling.

At dinner no one said a word. They ate quickly and put the dirty dishes in a dish pan under the sink. Dona was becoming more and more nervous. The wind had picked up outside and the rain was coming down harder. The lights flickered for a moment and Dona hooted. Sharon and John, went out onto the screened porch to watch the thunderheads

take on different shapes. Elizabeth-Martin asked to go with them, but Dona would hear nothing of it. "It's too dangerous outdoors for a youngin'" she told the child. "What would you do if'n a tree fell on yer head?" "I'd roll out from under it and then chop it up for kindling," she replied in defiant exasperation. "Why, what would you do?" "Nothin', I reckon, except lay there and yell fer help." "You're such a scaredy cat, Granny" the girl sang back, twisting out of Dona's grasp and bouncing into the livingroom.

Her granddaughter didn't miss a thing, Dona thought, a sharp little one with a mouth on her for sure. What she really needed was a good whippin', but her son and daughter-in-law wouldn't hear of it. But if Elizabeth-Martin were hers, it would be a different story. Dona understood her. She was stubborn, hard-headed, and it would probably take more than a good swat on the rear to break her of that. But for now, Dona didn't have time to worry about the child. The storm was at its worse and the house still had to be secured.

Dona moved deliberately through the second-floor rooms, turning off lights and unplugging major appliances. She drew all the curtains shut and then made her way downstairs. From the livingroom drifted the sound of the television. Dona

followed the voices and discovered Elizabeth-Martin curled on the couch eating a fudge brownie and watching afternoon cartoons. Dona did not enter the room, but spoke forcefully to the girl from the doorway. "Turn that thing off, Elizabeth-Martin, and get away from the window." " But I'm watching it, Granny," she wailed and added, "I won't do it. Now leave me alone." Dona made it to the television in three steps, hit the control button, and unplugged it from the outlet. "Hey, what do you think you're doing" the girl snapped. "Just cause you're afraid of the thunder doesn't mean we all gotta suffer with you!" Sharon heard this remark and yelled from the porch "Be nice, Beth, or no softball practice this week." Elizabeth-Martin flung a "sorry" at her grandmother and turned to look out the window. Outside the storm cast a dim yellow light over everything. Elizabeth-Martin loved that color which reflected off the low, heavy clouds. She loved the rumble and crash of thunder, but most of all, she loved making her grandmother nervous by sitting close to the window.

Dona watched her granddaughter on the sofa, peering out the window. "Get away from there before lightnin' runs in

and kills you," she said in a shaking voice. "Cain't you hear, I said get away!" At that moment, lightning flashed outside, striking a tree about two-hundred feet from the house. The loud, high-pitched crack of splintering wood shook the place. Dona screamed and sprang forward, pulling Elizabeth-Martin to the floor. John and Sharon ran to the living room to see if anyone was hurt. They found Dona shaking uncontrollably on the floor, her large body smothering the small child who tried to squirm out from under her. "For Christ's sake, what happened!" the mother's voice cracked.

A wide-eyed Elizabeth-Martin pushed her head through a triangle made by the crook of her grandmother's arm. " God must have thrown snake eyes, he must have lost to get so mad," she stuttered before breaking into tears.

VITA

Melissa Ball was born in 1967 in Knoxville, Tennessee.

She attended the University of Tennessee where she received her B.A. in English in 1989 and her M.A. in English with Creative Writing emphasis in 1992. She was the 1992 judge of the University of Tennessee Undergraduate Poetry Contest in Traditional Forms and a featured reader in the Phoenix Literary Magazine's Fall 1990 Poetry Reading. Her one true passion, in addition to writing, is travel. She has travelled extensively throughout the United States, Canada and Europe. Her most memorable trip was to Australia, home to angry, growling kangaroos. Melissa has held numerous jobs which include tutoring English, teaching two-year olds and making deli sandwiches. She plans to pursue a career as a writer and a teacher of both poetry and fiction.