

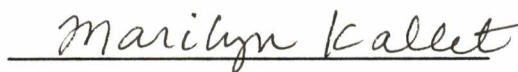
To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Adrienne McCormick entitled "The Things That Tell." 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.



Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:





Accepted for the Council:



Associate Vice Chancellor
and Dean of The Graduate School

THE THINGS THAT TELL

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Adrienne McCormick

May 1993

For my parents, who have been my maps

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ABSTRACT

This collection of poems and short stories coheres around the author's attempt to explore various elements of a life: maps followed, cover sought, rooms confined to and escaped from, as well as intellectual and emotional blossomings. Most of the poems are autobiographical, though equally fictional, as are all realities that the writer attempts to capture and see more clearly in words.

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INTRODUCTION

The vision presented in this collection of poems and short stories is somewhat akin to William Carlos Williams' notion of meaning being given off only in "isolate flecks," in the everyday experiences and emotions that are often taken for granted or overlooked as not worthy of a great deal of attention, things like feeding the dogs, watching someone sleep or getting a telephone call. In my poems, I try to capture this sense of the extraordinary that inhabits ordinary experience. But I also attempt to maintain the integrity of the ordinary; my poems are based on the commonplace in order to arrive at the knowledge of the marvelous that often resides therein. William Stafford works this way in his poems, and has been a model for me.

This collection is separated into four sections. The first section is a working out of the relationships that compose a family. Through these poems, I examine the sibling, father/daughter and mother/daughter relationships, the child's need to develop individually, as well as her inevitable following of the "map" the parents have made. I also look at the connections that exist in more extended family relationships, such as with grandparents and great grandparents. My reading of Sharon Olds provided me with an excellent example of how to explore family relationships in poetry. Olds' books Satan Says and The Father have been particularly influential in this aspect of my poetry.

The second section of this collection deals with romantic love and the fears and joys that accompany it. Mary Oliver's American Primitive has made a definite impact on this portion of my writing. I am not as influenced by her nature symbology, though I experiment with it in "The Stream," as I am by the manner in which she constructs physical love in terms of the divine functioning in human life. My portrayal of the physical aspect of love is measured not in terms of divinity, but in terms of how fundamental human love is to approaching on earth that which is generally referred to as the divine. Of course, human love is never an easy question to address; these poems struggle against it as much as they embrace it.

The third section, titled "Rooms," reveals the individual in dialogues with herself, exploring complex emotional situations in which decisions play a large part: decisions to leave people or places, both interior and exterior, behind. The rooms are both literal and figurative. They represent at different times entrapment, release, and the interiorization of experiences. In contrast, the last section portrays the individual breaking out of forms that are no longer sufficient to express her views of life. The five poems address varying situations, but the unifying element is a sense of venturing into new territories which, in turn, necessitates new means of expression.

My work has also been influenced by Emily Dickinson, whose poems introduced me to the possibilities of poetry as a source of personal expression. Her economy of language and her dense images have always been a standard of mine. C.K. Williams' poetry has been an example to me in his handling of what is too often categorized as the sordid and non-aesthetic: topics such as prostitution, destitution, and pornography. Williams questions the source of beauty by looking for it in a cow urinating or a man searching for breakfast in a garbage can. This and his use of the long line are elements I have experimented with in my own poems. Cathy Smith Bowers' poems also exhibit a skillful and honest handling of what is beautiful and what is terrible about ordinary lives. I have tried to emulate her expert sense of closure, and her seamless use of metaphor.

I have always been aware of poetry as a writing out of my unique experiences as a woman, and I have often found it difficult to articulate this experience due to a lack of models. My main sources of inspiration are my mother, grandmothers, and great grandmother; they have provided me with a wealth of material to explore through their lives and experiences. In this aspect of my poetry, Sharon Olds has influenced me the most. Olds' poems are unprecedented in their clear and powerful portrayal of women both within traditional roles and leaving those roles behind. Her metaphors stretch the limits of the reader's mind and are as

challenging and forward-reaching as her ideas. Thus, her work has been a strong source for me in my attempts to portray women moving into new territories and learning to express themselves in ways previously unknown to them. I hope to continue writing poetry that both re-visions the roles of women in society and challenges women and men to always look closely at their lives. Poetry is my means of looking.

I. MAPS

Scout Island

The brass key on my chain used
to open Busha's back door
on Ledyard Street, where she kept
canned goods for the next depression.
When she died, we found rows of them
still lining the shelves,
bloated by now with pressure
behind the boarded windows,
the empty house my father
never visited again.

On Scout Island, only
a shallow run of water
away from us at any time,
my brother and I found
the moss field.
I'm not sure when
we forgot which path led us to it.
We couldn't go there now
if we tried.

Now, I am miles
from Scout Island, my brother,
and the way we left home
every day to find deeper fields,
the further away the better.

Feedings

In Busha's backyard, the dogs were kept
in a narrow fenced-in space
with a house to sleep in
and bowls for water and food.
When Busha fed them, they would leap
wildly, charging the fence for reward,
their bodies steaming in the cold
Michigan air. She kept a saucepan
under the kitchen sink at all times,
and when there were leftovers, the dogs
would eat the remaining liverwurst
my brother could never finish.
Even the cereal she warmed milk for
would be poured in with the rest.

When it was time to put on our coats
and head out back, she would take the pan
and dump its riches on top of the latest
dog food on sale at Ray's. I would watch her
mix it all together with what she called
the dog's spoon, a crusted wooden hand
no longer used for anything but this
special purpose. She might have been baking
cookies for all the work she put in.
And if she set it before me
on the table with as much love,
I would have eaten it
with an equal measure;
I would have taken her love
any way I could get it.

Incongruities

Discovering my father
had been in an accident
was one of those moments
when I felt my heart
beat twice in strange succession.

Given this moments after
walking through the door,
the car still loaded,
I asked for proof
as if the stitches and scrapes
were not enough.
Things like how and when.
Thursday night,
a night like any other,
except my father
wandered in a park,
bleeding at ten p.m.

What was I doing?
Nothing came quickly to mind.
Then I remembered
dinner with friends
and later, making love
with you on the floor.

I dreamed of phone calls
in the middle of the night
saying your father is dead,
of making love
and never knowing
someone I needed
was in pain.

Reasons to Love

In my memory's eye, you sit
astride a large horse,
spirited, both of you
young and you still dancing away
from a girlhood
I imagine.

The letter sent
goes from my apartment
to the room in the house where you live.

Last week they found you
on the floor,
years since the reasons
that made any sense
had gone.

Trying to say
I am coming there too--
I ask if this love
will burn off with the rest,
or take me there more slowly.

for Gladys Montgomery,
my great grandmother

Stops

In a house on Wallington Road
my great grandmother lives
in a room complete
with kitchen, television and bed.

I visited her one January,
rode the blue line
as far as it would take me.
Travelling that far means
arriving at the point
where The Underground
no longer keeps under ground,
but surfaces and becomes
more like a train,
uncommon light
after miles of concrete
and dim signs.

At Chesham, I called
to let her know I had come;
I waited, awkward on the curb,
reading and rereading
the timetables on the wall.
When she pulled up, I grinned
at the white of her hair,
how big it looked
in the front seat of the car.
Climbing in, I could only grab
her hand, and press
kisses to it, though I yearned
to throw my arms around her,
to push back the years and see
the man who fathered her daughters,
the convent in Calcutta where she worked,
see how she dealt with the fear
that nothing would come out right,
least of all this small journey.

What I Inherited From My Mother

When asked how old she was
in the picture, mother whispered,
Seventeen probably, I don't remember.
When I was older, she told me
that was the year--

It is understandable
things end up like they do--
dreams spread on a small table,
legs in stirrups,
the machine whirring below
in a room with posters
on the ceiling, a nurse
who teaches you how to hug yourself,
a doctor who says
he can take care
of everything.

When she kisses me
good night, I touch
the curling ends of her hair,
and say sleep well, when I mean
stay with me a while,
tell me if you held on
so tight
you felt your arms
would break,
and if you were surprised
the day you discovered
you could, after all,
let go.

Initiation

I like to think of you, young in India
churning the dust with bare feet, laughing child
with obligatory braids and the gapped smile
I still see today. You said that cholera
couldn't slow you, though it basked in India
on the open stands of fruit; melon in a mild
hand and a fly's own quest for food brings a child
early to the rites of passage and messiah.

Those days seem mythic; what you survived
and what you save to tell, when spoken,
make maps to follow. And not knowing
what my cholera will be, I try
to miss the places marked forbidden
only to find them without looking.

for my mother

II. COVER

The Stream

Falling was such slow
motion, I expected to look up
and see you far ahead of me.

First my foot on the rock
deceptive in its nearness,
my knee hitting stone cool

through water, then my hand
on moss and deeper softness,
my elbow and shoulder sunk

beneath the smooth flowing
stream. Half of me rested,
enveloped in plush water

changed by my presence,
swirling around my ankles,
my hands, fighting the instinct

to scream, to rise. I stayed
there a few seconds, surging
the way the water did, pushing

against time and you above me,
watching my fall and the moment
I spent on those rocks.

Quicker, more painful in your eyes,
I rose from the unforgiving
moss, still green, still

slick as I clambered
to the less graceful edge
of grass and roots.

Looking at the smudge my body
left on the mossy bed, I dreamt
of climbing back in,

then you joining me,
until even we became
unlikely, soft and deep.

Whales

The brown surrounded me, the kind of water
you can't see through, not even your own feet,
not even your own hand, this close to the surface.

This was brand new, at once such ease, such slag, the licking
murk of the surface on my shoulders. Whales coursed beneath,
their tremendous bodies pulling everything along, and I,

afraid for my body, my small arms, felt the beginning
of fear, felt also the brush of intoxication, the swoosh
of one whale's tender arc. Then I knew why they were there.

Beyond their circling bodies and me, out where nothing
looked hard, I saw the perfect blue triangles waiting,
ready for me to give in to the terrible desire to keep going.

The Distance

I watch you go,
knowing your smile
comes from thinking

how good it was this afternoon,
and how much better leaving is

because you can. I swear
I don't mind, but not knowing
how to cover the distance

between what we do on the floor
and what our fears mean,

how could I ever admit
that I might not be
telling the truth

when, as you leave, I smile too
and say good night.

The Things That Tell

The day we first met,
the loads we carried, and the recognition,
were equal. How we walked with our heads up,
without bending forward
under the telling weights,

I don't know.
You speak of the things in your life
without blame --
these could be my own,
your brother or your dog,
the people you know,
what embarrasses you.

Even if we had run into each other that day,
these proofs would still be scattered between us.
So we circle, each deciding
how much to abandon, to reveal.

Music

I took violin lessons
in order to play for you
on your birthday. Believing
it could be done, and wanting
to surprise you, I acted
without fear, the way we do
in dreams, a single purpose
enough to guide an action.
You knew about the lessons;
there the whole time, you stood near
enough to take these silent
photographs you show me now,
my brows drawn close together,
eyes hard on the sheet music
before me, my face a scale,
determined and unaware.
No mirror has shown
me this. Is it what you see
when I sleep, when I am just
slipping down the guard that keeps
such moments, hard to behold,
to reveal, tucked in between
sheet music I never play?

Sweeping

All of this time together
choosing movies,
deciding where to eat,
standing in front of mirrors,

the bathroom, the bedroom,
you behind me, eyes meeting mine
with the look that says
what we are doing is necessary--

this comes to nothing.
After shopping for food,
the canned vegetables
stored in rows,

soups in order, the bread
put away, I sweep
and sweep the places
the dust sticks most,

the places that won't
come clean,
no matter how long
I push at the broom.

Whatever Comes

From mountaintops, you said, the world
might still seem large. Only
clouds and haze drifting between him
and what he'd like to be,

and they are but filament, portions
of small matter compared
to what builds between two people
who come this far and dare

to speak and make real the touchy
questions: where to sleep, to eat
and all that the findings imply.
Soon it starts to repeat--

do I say yes, do I say no,
to go to the mountains
or stay here the same, as if I
were a zoom, some lens

used to render the distance clear,
bringing it to the table
to loom between you, the peas and what
I am no longer able

to pretend. The spacious world appears
large and joyful at first,
but for these cold dreams, whatever comes,
I'll trade and take the worst.

Near and Far

I am not frightened by this world,
the song goes, and I wish
today could be tomorrow
so you would be near.

Days we had together
have become one. Hours into days

into nights, moments I clung to
for cover, finding your body
safe, the world I knew.
Now that I have only words on paper,

I am wishing for days to pass,
as if nothing changes,
as if by getting you back,
I won't have to admit

I'm afraid you'll make
these worlds I've fought
come true--

Time, and distance;
body, mind.

Every day,
you are near, you are far.

After Sleep

In bed I know you
like this, backlit by cool
lines of light from the streetlamp
outside the window, falling
across your face and body,
I wish they could lead me
to wherever you so quickly go,
slipping back
to some fragrant moment
you lived once

but didn't have enough of;
I wonder if when you get there
I'll appear, drawn in
as if by touch or smell,
a shift in weight.

After the soft way you pull
the covers over me, and the moment
just before your breathing changes
when your fingers play with mine,

after getting this close,
I always wonder if it can
ever happen again,

if it gets any better than this.

The Mystery

What is the secret
of keeping above flak,
the sometimes invisible debris
that flies through the air?

Yesterday or last year,
the fiancé of a girl I know
got caught by putting
a bullet through his heart.

She walks in rain, or maybe
sun shines on her, or on any one
of those still living.

Naming It

In front of mirrors, what unfolds is seen
for the first or the eleventh time.
You have a confession to make, you said.

On mornings when we are surrounded
by damp sheets, you go to get a towel,
I shore myself against what you may know
or say, at any given time,
I am surrounded.

How many times have I kissed you, you ask.
If we could trace them, they would be here
and here and here. The bruise on my spine
is the color of an apple

after it is dropped. I can smell it,
the tangy pith remains on my teeth,
words I am always about to say
when you ask me
what I'm thinking.

The Basement

I wanted to see if I could see you
from the window, to know you had arrived--
From fourteen stories up, the landscape looks
like a scene from my basement as a child,
the train set set-up on a board, a town
with blue paint water and plastic pine trees.
I labored there for hours to no end.
Occasionally, the streets became real--
water reflected sharp speckles of light,
trees gave off scents I believed in, then loved.
What I came to know was the brevity
of those moments, how they bury the more
available beauty, my need to see
if I could see you, and not to and smile.

Cover

There is a habit of mine
you don't know yet,
a way of looking
through things to meanings

that aren't there.
Not the way you pull the blankets
to make sure I'm covered too,
but that you do it at all --

I trust that. If I didn't,
what good would there be
in going through with it --

Moments when
nothing is large enough
to cover both of us.

III. ROOMS

Resentment

The last time I saw Celie,
she was sitting on the floor
of your apartment watching
me through the window as I
packed my car to leave. Her four
legs fit snug to the body
between the blinds and the pane,
her nose smudging the plain glass
into a personal work
of art, a performance piece.
Her other pieces included
the base of the rattan chair
she restructured with her teeth.
You replaced it with hard wood
and locked her in the bathroom.
The door became her canvas.
She worked on it with her teeth,
making a bed of splinters
for her belly and hound ears
as she chewed the giving wood.
These and more became funny
anecdotes to tell buddies
over beer, while she, licking
at your feet, jumping to be
in your lap, jumping and jump-
ing again, would then resort
to the kitchen window where
she could watch the parking lot
for signs of life. Seeing her
there in the window as I
pulled away, the gift I gave
you for your birthday, I thought
I would miss her, that at least
one of us needed the other.
I had not counted on this.

In the Absence of Pain

I have stopped inviting them in,
so they stand on the cold ground
outside looking in at me
through the sheers. I see them
mouthing your name, hollow
and hollow again on their fleshy lips.

From the shoulders up, I see
the heads move back and forth,
searching for me. They know I
left you, but they don't know
what to do, how to feel

after so long. So they press
against my window, afraid
that the pain I feel
will never visit them again.
They want mine, but I am hiding

an impenetrable foot away.
Between the first and last syllables,
their mouths go grey with fear.

Vessel

He dips into the gourd
and rushes his fingers
through the cool.

She says she enjoys it,
and he believes

she is telling the truth.
The way his hand is wet on her skin
makes her think

she needs to wash.
And later, when a drop of sweat
falls from his brow

to hers, she wonders
who made the gourd hollow,

and how she ever
let it happen.

The Abortion

Every time you fall down, you die,
or so it seems. And because
standing up means grieving,
I wanted to stay there for a while,
on the floor.

I thought I was the only one,
but I had no idea. Not wanting
to witness a falling apart,
needing to disguise the fear,
the recognition in their eyes,

friends looked away when told to.
Because they did,

I hated them even more.
Saying "I know" was always a lie.
I would have settled for them
to just gather me up, lifeless

in their knowing, uncertain arms.

Room

Half of the jar holds air, half the fetus.
I need a white label to stick on the side.
I would write MEMORY in black capital letters,
as if I would ever forget, myself or the others.

Lined up like jars, we sat together,
three women and I ushered through
consecutive small rooms,
one for sedatives and counseling,
one for blood work,
one for the final wait
with women's magazines and reproductive organs
on posters pinned to the wall.

Over plastic ovaries and Good Housekeeping
on the coffee table, we started talking.
As the nurse called us one by one,
we even laughed about how hungry we were,
what we would eat when we got home.

I was the last in the room.
I forgot I would see them
on the other side, as the nurses
monitored for normal responses.
In large blue plastic chairs,
they fed us cookies and juice,
they combed our hair,
they smiled to see us well.

We moved in tender orbits,
a single room with eight
large blue plastic chairs.
I felt I would flow
over the plastic edge,
down the hall and away
to leave without the one
in the waiting room
snoozing in front of a sitcom
on the overstuffed couch,
unaware, unborn.

The Boar's Head Dinner

She called Monday morning
to talk about friends, love
and other recent needs.
Soon, remembering when
we lived together, I
found myself there again
in an old room with high
ceilings and clunking heat.
The mattresses on the floor
were covered with a blue
and orange cloth she brought
home as a surprise. Now,
it lurks among memories
of the mimosa party
and cocktails before
the Annual Boar's Head Dinner
when she and I dropped the pig.
We had just enough time to
put it back together
before the procession.
I hefted the greasy
head back on its skewers,
we chased the cherry eyes,
the apple and the crown--
I had just enough time
to wipe my hands off on
my panty hose before
going through the door,
tears of laughter
coursing down my cheeks,
trying to face those faces
with some semblance
of composure.

IV. BLOSSOMINGS

How Words Wing Away

I want to know how
to render words powerful,
to find again the blossom
even after petals litter
a once clean surface.
You tell me you are sorry--
I believe I can do it again,
turn old apologies,
arguments I never had,
into triumphs,
all that's left of old pains,
the source of what we call wisdom.

In my mind, the battle keeps on;
I am winning. In my dream,
I wear a wet soiled dress
of white lace, and good friends
tell me my mistakes.
I spend time with my parents.
They take care of things.
They prepare to give me away.

I write dreams on paper;
I record the pain in poems.
But words still wing by me,
and I think, if I try hard enough,
I can win the battle,
escape the dream.
If I write long enough
words become sounds
that soon go away.
Like apologies, they light
on thin branches
that fall and snap
under the shiny foot
of wisdom, just another word
that wings away, leaving
many others in its place.

Pouring Out

Barefoot, thirteen,
the red Alabama soil
covering the skin
on my feet and ankles,

I remember running
for the joy of running,
for the pleasure in sound
the packed trails made

when met with the pound,
pound of naked feet.
No one taught me
to keep covered,

to keep the clean
earth clean.
Once those meetings
became memory,

I fought the lesson
that something about me
was forbidden, cursed,
when all I have ever known

is that life begins
inside of me,
and one day began
pouring out and out.

A Pregnancy Come True

The gift I bought for Missy
to share with her coming child,
a book of animal tales
with a shiny white cover
that slicks against the skin
in a satisfying way,
may never leave
the nursery shelf.
The tales will be shelved for days
when talking and singing fail,
when rocking doesn't suffice.
They will be brought down,
brushed off with a swipe.
I'll be lurking inside,
in writing on the inside page,
wishing her well in the roles
of mother, wife and reader,
in a scrawl I felt compelled
to write, the way I felt
compelled to buy animal
tales, just so they'd
be there for her on days
when nothing seems to suffice.
Looking back, the inscription
I insisted on scribbling
was more for me than for her.
What I didn't write was clear--
Just when did everything change?
When she used to live next door,
we only uttered the word
pregnant at the end of each month
when we thanked God we weren't.
As her body nourishes
the child within, I'm a note
in a book on a shelf, stuck
between tales and realities
I'm not sure I believe.

The Flush

The time we took the pictures,
the afternoon sun had
a certain slant of light,
that made me want
to stretch warm and naked
in the center of it.
Making love was slow,
the breeze filling
the drapes, billowing,
exhaling, then stillness.
You thought the light
would be good for the colors
of my skin, the pinks,
the reds I keep hidden.
What could be ugly,
I thought, in that light.
Nothing could have prepared me.
Wanting only to capture somehow
the way the light was that day,
an envelope around us,
we trapped in bad shots
the beautiful.

Flipping through them
outside of the drugstore,
I wondered if the clerks
looked, or some stranger
in the development lab.
What if I had taken them
to a one-hour developer,
the places that scroll pictures
on display in mall windows.
What would the casual shopper do,
seeing my splotchy skin,
the ball of carpet fuzz
stuck on my thigh,
the way the flush
appears even more florid
when seen in the light.

Small Fires

The occasional bird
passes by
as I sit,
your head

on my shoulder,
you sleep
as I watch
blue against brick.

A small plane
crosses outside.
I am out
on its wing.

Over the city, small fires
by the old train station
seep up to me, thin strands
 of smoke and life.

I wonder
who is on fire, on the face
of the earth,
who is still burning,
 unless it is
 all of us?

VITA

Adrienne McCormick was born in Saginaw, Michigan, where she spent the first eight years of her life. In 1977, she moved with her family to Decatur, Alabama, which she now calls her home. She received the B.A. with a double major in English and drama from Queens College in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1991. After completing her M.A. with Writing Emphasis at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, she will attend the University of Maryland to pursue the Ph.D., concentrating in women's literature and contemporary American poetry. Her future plans are to teach at a small liberal arts college and continue writing.