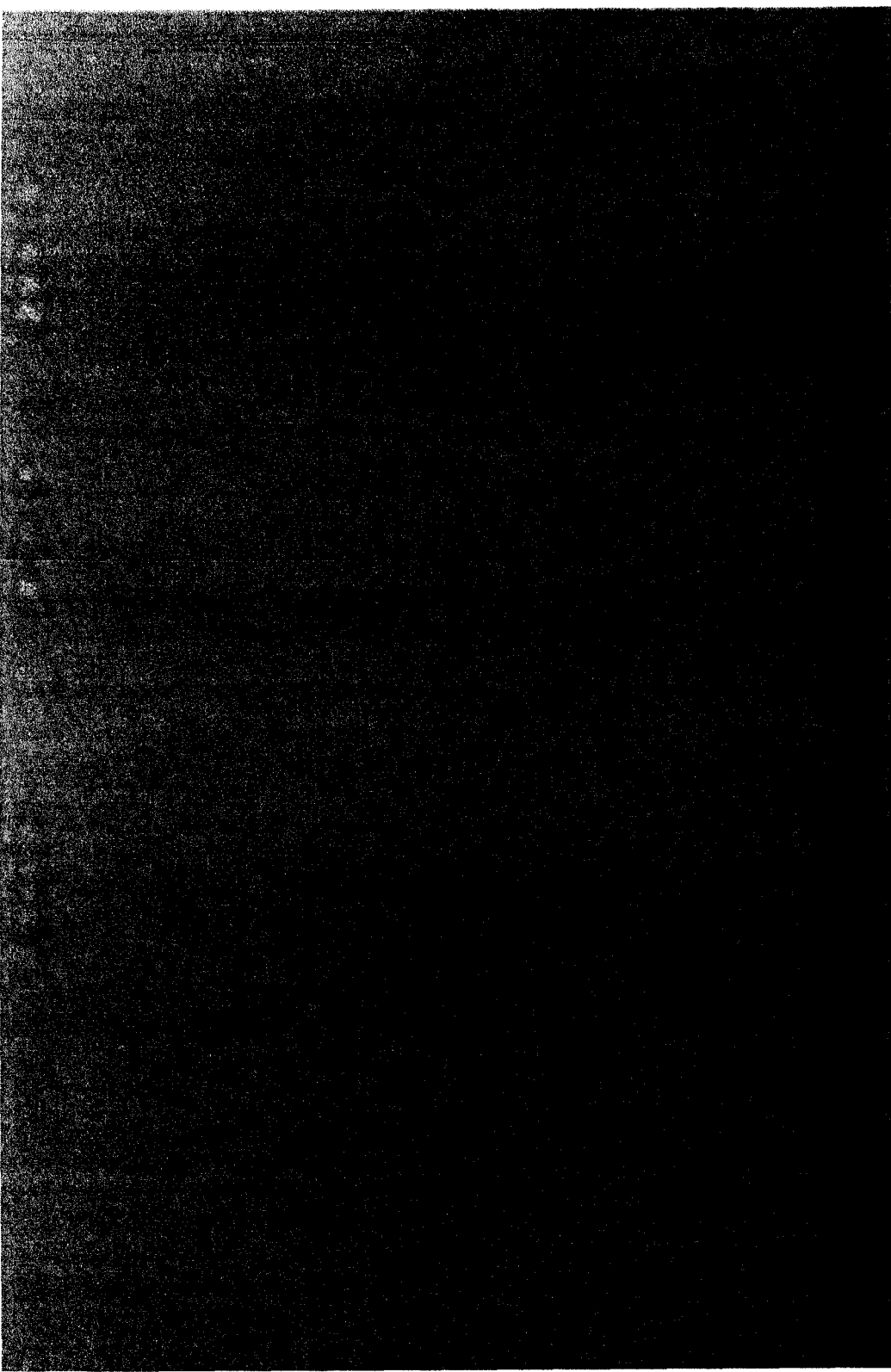




Last Call

Poems of connection

by Erin Mulert

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Introduction

Relationships are never simple. They are a complex intertwining of past, present, and future that is rarely logical and never constant. It is doubtful that we will ever understand all their intricacies. We can, however, examine snapshots of them, those brief moments of connection. This chapbook is about those moments. It is about wanting, having, losing, and remembering them.

The poems in this book reflect a variety of influences—Yusef Kuomunyakaa's blues, Lucille Clifton's courage, Marilyn Kallet's sensuality, and Dorianne Laux's eye for beauty in the ordinary. Singing their music, I have found my voice. Through the instruction of my professors, I have learned to train that voice. There was a time that I would not edit a piece for fear of losing the urgency of the moment it captured. Now it is unthinkable for me to allow a poem to escape unscathed. Paul Valery once said, "A poem is never finished, only abandoned." It has taken me countless hours and reams of paper to fully appreciate the wisdom of that sentence.

I confess I had a difficult time finding a title for this collection. Nothing seemed to capture the meaning of my work. When Last Call was recommended to me, it was to be little more than a fitting title for a senior project. It has since sounded a deeper resonance in me. Like the first sip of that last drink, that instant, when you are forced to think of both beginnings and endings at once—that is the core of these poems.

*To Marilyn,
for sharing her music
and her wisdom*

I. Flesh and blood

My Poems

To Mother, they were French--
foreign and beautiful.
She misinterpreted, edited meanings
into preordained syntax of hers.

To Father, they were shelves,
held something greater than their weight.
He checked joints, buffed the finish, asked
When will you build one for me?

Old Songs

*I asked my daddy, 'Where are we goin'?'
He said 'we'll just follow our nose'
so I looked out the window
and dreamed I was a cowboy.
- "On the Road", John Denver*

Memories hide in lyrics, nestled
like me between Mom and Dad.
Family roadtrips in hi-fi stereo.
One song is enough—
Suddenly I'm six years old,
forehead pressed to the window
of an old station wagon.

John Denver is my carsick sister,
my snoring brother. He is
"I Spy" and "Road Trip Bingo",
rest stops, motels,
and a bag full of roadtrip snacks.
Softly rocked by the road,
the smell of upholstery and Mom's perfume,
I never cared that we listened
to the same tape all day.

Years older, and I still believe
heaven is a blue Chevrolet.
As long as Dad keeps driving,
and Mom keeps singing,
I can be six, with my forehead
pressed to the window.

Innocence

My niece tromps around in
too-big pumps, an old handbag
slung over her slight shoulder.
See, Dolly? I'm big like Mommy.

Growing up means having
gum, nail polish, and soda.
I have that when I get bigger.
She doesn't know about school or deadlines,
only cares about Disney nighties
and pink, satin slippers. She tells me
You have these when you get smaller.

Three years old, and she wants to be a big girl
with a Gucci purse, high-heeled shoes.
Twenty-one, and I want to be a little girl,
twirling in a Tinkerbell nightgown.

For Alexis

When they said

ovary, surgery

I felt the tumor pulse in me
like an egg carved out of blood—

endo

metri

osis

My first thought: children

They said I might be fine.

I might be fine.

The look on his face—

struggle of unconditional love
against the real conditions of love

The silence between us

no words brave enough to break it—

In sickness and in health.

A week later, I'm counting

the call buttons on a hospital bed,

calculating the time

since my last shot of morphine.

The egg is gone, she left me

pretty as a textbook.

Graceful curve of tubes,

perfect symmetry of womb.

Now is only the parade of faces,

brows nervous, high, peaked.

Bouquets and stacks of magazines—

the slick pictures of perfect women,

bikinis flaunting their

scarless bellies.

The nurse urges the pills,

500 milligrams of oblivion.

I close the magazines,

swallow gladly.

Miscarriage

Blocked by miles of telephone wire,
my sister-in-law couldn't see
the sadness in my mother's eyes.
Mom took the news
with her usual grace,
washed it down with
comforting words
and a Diet Coke.

After dinner, I found her
scrubbing a clean plate,
as if reality was a spot of sauce
she couldn't quite get.

I hugged her, felt her heart
beat low in my chest.
In a breath, I knew
the dark, warm world,

and I felt the weight of what had happened
open inside my belly,
empty but heavy.

Meals Ready to Eat

Deployed,
my brother eats
astronaut pears and
boot camp stews,
vacuum-packed in
matte black plastic.

He has desert dreams of
real food, Mom's food—
hot chicken, corn,
mashed potatoes
with the skins, sweet tea
and a wedge of lemon.

Wartime's measured in MREs—
38 dinners to go.
Each tastes a little
less like food,
little less
like home.

Birthday Girl

My mother and sister-in-law
have slaved over the cake.
Turrets of pink sugar,
a blue frosting drawbridge,
and a little girl's name
scrawled over the gate.
Today my niece is three.

I remember the first birthday—
a half-naked child with icing in her hair,
one year old, and already running.

The presents have been opened,
the cake devoured. This time,
the icing is smeared on the table.
In the backyard, a 3-year old girl
swings at a star-shaped piñata.

Tonight, she will sleep,
new Barbies clutched in her tiny hands.
She will dream of a castle made of sugar
and a star that rains candy, not thinking
that it will ever have to end.

In leaving, there is always leaving behind

At twenty-one, I was getting out
in faded jeans and broken flip-flops.
Told my sister I'd come home every chance.
She just sipped her Lipton,
knowing it was a lie.

When we were younger,
she told me how she'd run,
how she'd be carried off
by a husband and a job in the Rockies.
She got the husband
but not the job,
found herself tied
to the only place she hated.

She never said I was wrong to leave,
only smiled with sad envy, knew
that when I said *goodbye*, I meant
I'm not coming back.

II.
Seduction and cheap wine

My Mother's Nipples

My parents talked about sex through
Life Cycle books placed
for seven-year-old eyes.
I memorized the diagrams—
fetus morphs into baby,
becomes girl, woman, mother.
I studied the blooming
breasts and strawberry nipples,
triangle of curls and widening hips,
swelling of belly and feet.

In a JCPenney dressing room,
I compared my mother with those drawings,
considered the curve of breast tipped deep pink
with the cool eye of an artist.
It was years before I connected
the sketch of a woman breastfeeding
to my own mother.

Those books taught me the mechanics of sex,
the physics of the physical,
never the feelings.
Years later, I have her nipples,
the cherry silk that is both mother and lover.
No milk, I nourish with touch,
give the boy what parent cannot.
After the writhing, sweat,
final push and expulsion,
we lay like mother and child,
his lips still damp on my breast.

Slip

I haven't put it away.
I've tried draping it over
the arm of my chair, an open drawer.
I even tried to wear it
the night we broke up,
thought it might
make me feel whole.

It remembers
the way you touched it,
touched me through it.
It remembers the candles,
heavy with vanilla,
the heart you arranged them into.

I'm going to leave it out
until it forgets, until
the memory goes stale. I'll
put it away when it's just
a scrap of red satin
that I can fold you up in
and forget.

Rewind

He was so unlike you—
an Englishman with Elvis' birthday,
easy charm, and slim hips.
I gave myself to the furthest thing from you,
and prayed it would be enough.

He had blue suede shoes
and thick, black hair,
but his voice was all wrong,
so I went to Memphis alone.
I-40 at ninety miles an hour,
I tried to outrun you.
Twenty miles from grace,
you caught up, and I was
too tired not to cry.
Momma heard the tears in my throat.
Come on home, I'll make dinner.

That night it was comfort food and
my own bed. My mother's voice whispered
goodnight, and I slept myself into the past.
The fan blew dust from my lampshade,
rustled pictures on the wall.
I was twelve, and we hadn't met.

Fluidity

Water slips from the sponge,
washes sighs down your chest.

Wet and glistening, my fingers
trace the curve of your chin.

Steam and candlelight melt into each other,
collect as beads on stems of wine.

For one moment,
the world is simple—
two souls press
into each other,
find the passage beyond skin
into breath.

Saturdays

In the soft haze of morning
I have watched you,
wrapped in soft oblivion,
your lips red
with the flush of dreams.
I have learned you by heart—
the curl of your lashes,
the taste of your skin,
the smell of sleep
lingering in your hair.

So many times,
I wanted to rouse you,
kiss you into waking, wanted
to make love in the sun.
Instead, I let you sleep, reveled
in the perfect, simple peace.

Premembering

After the last box rides to Memphis, the last bag to England,
I will sift through pictures and maps, and look at a Cambridge
I can't imagine now, a city before I knew you.

How often did we pass in Sainsbury's, rush by on King's Parade?
By the light of dreams, I will see you a thousand times—
leaving the tobacconist, palming apples in the Market, slipping
into the Eagle on Benet Street.

The sentimental picture I keep of you spends hours
punting lazily along the river or sprawled on a blanket, dreaming
about the American girl who loved you, whom you
were too scared to love, to whom
you are vanilla cigars and liquorice, the girl
who will remember you in poems.

You will go back to your River Cam, I to my Mississippi. Eventually
all rivers find the ocean, the collected thoughts of loves.
As we are drawn back to the rivers, so we are drawn back to each other.

Last Call

That year was our finale—
a house on Highland packed with
alcohol and foreign men.
We sipped bourbon and shot tequila,
trying to memorize the slow burn of those last days.

In a year, we would be scattered
like the shards of a stained glass window
each color left to glitter in some far corner.

Night after night,
we swore beer-soaked curses at
grad schools, jobs,
lives in shabby apartments,
lives we didn't want.

We wanted cigarettes and innuendoes,
seduction and cheap wine, wanted
this life to stand still.

About the Author

Born in California but raised in Collierville, Tennessee, **Erin Mulert** graduated from Collierville High School. She went on to graduate with honors with her B.A. in English from the University of Tennessee in 2003. During her time at UT, she participated in poetry outreach workshops to area high school and worked for the Young Writers' Institute for two years, where she had the opportunity to teach a workshop in 2003. She is a current member of the Knoxville Writers' Guild.

Mulert is a recipient of a Graduate Teaching Assistantship and the John C. Hodges Fellowship at the University of Tennessee, where she will return in the Fall of 2003 to pursue her M.A. in Creative Writing.