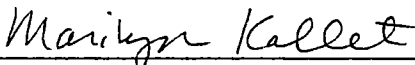
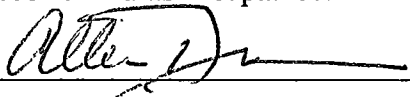


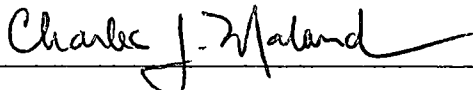
To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Sherri Mahoney Jacobs entitled "Little Histories." 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.

  
Marilyn Kallet, Major Professor

We have read this thesis  
and recommend its acceptance:

  
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\_\_\_\_\_

Accepted for the Council:

  
Interim Vice Provost and  
Dean of The Graduate School

Little Histories

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Sherri Mahoney Jacobs

May 2001

For Michael

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I could not have completed this collection without the help, the nudging, the editing, and the various trips to local coffee and chocolate shops with Dr. Kallet. Without her help and support, I would not be the writer I am today.

Without the encouragement, love, and support of my husband, Michael, none of this would have been possible. He has been my catalyst and my salvation.

## ABSTRACT

The writing in this semi-autobiographical collection falls into two categories--actual people and situations and those that are purely fictional. Although the lines between real and imaginary blur in every piece, whether it is poetry or fiction, the intention is the same. Each work tries to capture a little history--a dream, a memory, a creative moment in the life of the speaker or narrator. To feel, to record, and to share these little histories are the aim of this collection, and the aspirations of this writer.

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## INTRODUCTION

Of course, the very last thing I did in putting this thesis together was this introduction. How was I going to put what I wrote, how I wrote, why I wrote, and what influenced me in writing into words that would capture what I was trying to express? At a poetry reading that I attended at the Laurel Theatre in Knoxville on March 1 of this year, the poet Jeffrey Skinner said that he would be reading the poem about writing that all poets say they will never write. I myself wrote such a poem a few months back and called it "Again." In that poem (included in this collection), I called the urge to write "a thin humming need." That is the basis for all my work, both poetry and prose--the desire to express what I am thinking, feeling, and knowing in words on a page. I want to feed on the outcome of my writing and to feed others.

The title was another part of this thesis that I could not bring myself to come up with. All titles I tried seemed too heavy, too trite, too silly, or too *something*. The variety of subjects I wrote about seemed hard to pin down--from ex-husbands, to lobster and lion muses, to shoes, to coffee shop employees. How was I going to pull that into a cohesive whole?

Then I wrote "shoes." The idea for that poem came as I was walking down a long hallway in the Humanities and Social Sciences building, on my way to teaching a freshmen composition class. As I "clickety-clicked" down that hallway in my "yeah, you got a grown-up here" pumps, I thought, "This is all we have--these little day-to-day events, these little histories."

All I can ever hope to do with my writing is to grapple with an instance or a moment in my life, to capture it in some way on a blank page in poetry or prose, and to transmit that struggle for expression to others. I have tried to do that with this collection in all its various vehicles and narratives.

Love and the loss of it are the proverbial poetic themes, and seem to dominate the first section of my thesis. I have had my share of poems inspired by just these universal concerns. From the start of attraction in "Impulse" to closure at the end of a relationship in "Overdue" to a full-blown love lyric in "Water and Skin," I hope I have in some small way represented this subject here. Trying to break free and find an identity again after a relationship is also a concern of my work and is expressed in "ExAmple" and in "My Ex-Husband's Taxes."

Trying to find direction and identity at all, then, is rampant in my poetry. Wandering through a day and "wasting" time doing so are approached in "Today" and "Some Days." I have placed those together as companion poems. Neither one is completely convincing as an argument that wandering is always equal to wasting. Sometimes it is just joyous to use up a day "foolishly" as in "UT in the Spring."

The second section about dreams also has poems that are best read as companion pieces to those that precede them. In last semester's "Dreamworks" class, led by Dr. Marilyn Kallet, our subject matter for our poems was taken directly from a dream journal we were required to keep. In one of my dreams, I encountered a young lion that decided to take my hand in his mouth. In "The Young Lion, Revisited" I used a Jungian technique that I learned from Dr. Kallet called "active imagination." Actually, I altered the technique a little to suit my own situation. Active imagination calls for a quiet place

in which to meditate without distraction, to speak with the images and creatures that have come to light in dreams in order to make some sense of the encounters. I spoke to the lion figure while making the familiar drive home from Knoxville to Morristown in my rusty old Geo. The lobster that showed up in my dreams and ended up in "Lead Fire" became, after a serious active imagination episode (appropriately), "The Lobster."

The third section of my collection is two prose selections, which also have as a theme a searching for direction and knowledge. In each, the characters are faced with a difficult situation and react to that difficulty in very different ways.

I would list Sandra Cisneros and Pablo Neruda as influences on using poetic words with passion. Galway Kinnell I choose also as a passionate word-use inspiration and as a poet that can take any subject, as in "The Cellist," and manage to use such beautiful language as "syzygial amplexus" in an attempt to create meaning. In contrast to the lyrical poetry of Kinnell or Neruda or Cisneros, objectivism and imagism are also major forces in my poetry. Along that line, I admire William Carlos Williams for several reasons: in his absolute avoidance of cliché, his use of the objective world as subject matter, and his writing about his own locality as a metaphor for the world. My admiration for Williams' stripping a poem down to the bare minimum of images and words is also reflected in my admiration of the prose author, Raymond Carver. As in my selections of poets, I also have a contrasting influence to name in the vein of prose. Hardly a minimalist author like Carver, Zora Neale Hurston wrote of life, love, and loss with beautiful imagery and prose so tasty you could eat it.

One of the last dreams that I had while in that incredible "Dreamworks" class involved me literally falling to pieces while continuing to write. In the same way that

"Lead Fire" had me "scratch the end of the line/Lift it off the page./And eat it.", my poem "Rubedo" has me turning at the end of the poem (after a terrible struggle) to words as food. Words are what I feast on; they are sustenance. This is what I am ultimately trying to accomplish. Hopefully with my writing here and my writing to come, some of my words can be nourishment both to me and to others.

## I. IN WAKING

shoes

clickety-click  
sophisticated rhythm  
shiny-and-I-don't-care-who-knows-it  
power suit pointy toes  
yeah, you got a grown-up here

wait  
soft  
sensible  
I don't even play tennis  
    but, man, I am *MOVING*  
just add water  
    they chirp flying down the linoleum

flat-bottomed skittish patterned soles  
wrapped around my ankle in a leather embrace  
    give me a carpet \* \* \* I'm electric  
on moist days I bring with me where I've been  
    dried mud sticks pebbles wherever I walk

(little histories)

## Overdue

In late summer,  
trees blister with color  
and curl at the edges.

I've made the decision  
to clean out  
the back room.

broken croquet mallet  
soiled double heart frame  
keys to a car driven out of state

Done.  
It's been done.  
Now I can plant more marigolds,  
harvest the plums.

**Non-Traditional Student**

I sit in art class  
gazing at round arches,  
pointed arches

Imagining  
when I get home

I'm going to  
call the bank  
type a Western Civ paper (with bibliography)

And  
I'm going to bite your cheek  
till it welts  
and bleeds.

I trust you'll do the same  
to my naked shoulder.

**Today**

I went to the mall  
walked around  
didn't talk to anybody  
except the guy at the book store.  
I didn't feel like it.

I bought silly things  
things I wanted  
things I didn't need

Three peacock feathers  
a book of poetry by an author I never heard of  
a candle that's brown, smells like cloves

and a diet Coke.  
I was really thirsty.

I kicked a red jellybean down  
two flights of stairs.  
It got in my way.

An old man wouldn't look me in the eye (he was afraid).

I don't know why.

### Some days

Today is a mulling moody day, a day that rambles, that wanders endlessly.  
I want to accomplish things; I need to get things done. I don't. Instead I think

too hard: that's what Michael tells me. I'll go to the store; I can accomplish there,  
hefty fill in the square completions. Dreamy procrastinations?--only in my past.

In line buying cleaners and wintergreen mints, winter and green, opposites...  
Focus! Grab energized diligence from the hazy air.

Now I'm moving, unwavering, deliberately against the direction of  
the white pavement arrows. Driving, peripheral sights pull me from the straight and  
narrow,

objects whizzing together, change is a flash of sunlight on a mud puddle.  
Gravel sounds grind me back to myself, my own driveway, home, where the resolute  
heart is.

Through the door, past the dusty glass-top tables, marred with coffee rings and junk mail.  
Ancient kitchen window, glass liquidly settled to the bottom of the sill, refracted light

on the blue plastic bags crackling on the counter. I should put things in their place.

I don't.

I meander outside, squint in the sunshine, caress the lavender stalks, smell my fingers.

### Impulse

The memory of you presses in  
between the lines of the book I try to read  
into my grocery lists  
flanks the glasses in my dishwasher.  
The trace won't stop  
so I decide to revel in it.

My eagerness to have you was so ferocious  
I felt my skin would split,  
my insides jumping out to devour you.

I tripped impatiently on the threshold,  
the walls, first blue in the dim light,  
then green, in the glow prowling  
around the corner from the bathroom.

All buzzing thoughts  
four full hours of lying this way and that  
I could picture the edge of everything  
slicing skin off your back with plum-colored nails  
running fingertips over your exposed ribs  
crunching into the soft muscle between your neck and your collarbone  
hair a wild storm at the back of my neck  
clinging in moisture to my temples

Going until I was nothing but a rung out washcloth  
at the last soft and rough sucking noises  
you twisted your hands in my hair  
rubbed me with your scent  
pushed the bones of your hip into me and left your mark.

Example

One look in his hazel eyes,  
I remember that lies run in packs.

I'm balancing on a wall  
inching forward  
one foot in front of the other.

Words fall in sugar cubes onto his tongue,  
leak out his blinding teeth  
(he has a *beautiful* smile).

Arms outstretched.

The nostalgic two-step begins...

Do you still and remember when we (fill in the blank)

Old western movie towns, simply building fronts  
--there aren't any rooms behind.

A walking crucifix  
wavering back and forth  
for balance.

It's always the familiar.  
Years and wisdom don't look the same.

I get to the edge  
take a breath

jump

**UT in the Spring**

I crush the fallen petals  
courtesan dogwoods  
have tossed beneath my sandals.

The sun warms  
my cavalierly coatless back.

Mathematically,  
I plan a route  
to dodge the sprawled,  
coupled bodies on the lawn.

The wind has whipped my hair  
into a hive of cotton candy.

I brave the Frisbee gauntlet,  
saunter towards the Golden Roast  
claim my table outside to savor

a lavish double mocha latte  
as if the glorious weather  
or the paper money in my wallet  
were reproductive,  
infinite.

Again

the thin, humming need  
inchoate basis for the written word

in dirty piles  
shovel thoughts out  
scrape with a spoon the details, pat the form, fill in the spaces

a line puddles in the mind  
turn on the faucet  
the words sputter, run faster, hotter  
    then a  
    trickle

some words burn  
hot blue flames  
searing the edges

others float in  
    on  
        a current

method different  
madness same

tension  
release  
begin

## II. IN DREAMS

### The Ledge

Walking warm in the green soft grass  
surrounded with people that know me, have known me.  
they're milling around with room to spare,  
tossing smiles back at me.

The ledge narrows.  
They're moving me toward center  
keeping me to the cool rock  
jutting up through the grass.

No one is looking at me  
revert to all fours,  
clutch at the sharp stone with my fingers,  
near panic in my fear of falling.

I stop.  
(How high *is* this ledge?)

I let go  
hit  
knees buckle  
hands slap the stinging gravel  
heart pounds like a fist in my chest...

Then I stand up.

**Summons**

I can't remember my father's voice any more.

I try, conjure,  
can't bring it to mind.

If I heard it in a crowd of thousands,  
I'd know which one was his.

He's more like a dream I once had  
than a person I knew,  
more like a character in one of my mind-plays  
than a man who was my father.

I can see my palm on his palm,  
fingers outstretched,  
measuring.

I do have dreams about him.  
He speaks to me without  
saying a word.

Last night  
In the ugly green net shirt  
(the one I thought he'd never wear)  
he looked in my eyes,  
placed his hand over his heart,  
moved it out and back  
to make a soft double thud.

No words;  
his voice gone.

**Ex-Husband's Taxes**

My muscles tense, pulling  
my ex's hand  
off my white white shirt.

His arm flops to his side.  
He looks at me, puzzled.  
"But I need you to do my taxes."

"I can't help you," I say quietly,  
"I can only fly  
while I'm in this dream."

Advancing up the metal stairs  
by the side of Montague Foods,  
I stop at the top step, glance back.

He's waving at me.  
Calling me.  
Beside the bright blue recycling bin.

Snow

Center of field,  
blinding white.

Deathly quiet,  
perforating a trail.

My footprints disappear  
as I step out of them.

Bright breath in,  
billows out.

No one can find me out here.

### Water and Skin

I entered the dream running  
without needing to stop  
without tiring

I was leaping into the air  
suspended, floating,  
moving toward the top of the sand dune on the horizon  
knowing the water waiting for me on the other side.

My leaps became longer, more sustained  
I was flying  
up and over sandy slopes in huge gulping leaps.

I glanced down, saw you sleeping,  
your body curled and exposed,  
alone at the foot of the dune.  
I longed to lie next to you;  
I wanted the water more.

I tried to leap over you.  
But my needing you  
yoked my body to the earth, saturated.

I looked to the crest of the sand dune,  
reaching for the feel of the water,  
outstretched spread fingers to the moist wind.  
Hoping.

But I lay down behind you  
with my chin flooding the space  
between your cheek and your shoulder  
my body liquidly formed to yours,

Two naked apostrophes.  
We heard the waves in the distance.

**Lion**

Finally  
Assignments done  
No one claims me  
Any more,  
Enjoy the simple  
Used to be.

Folding towels  
Warm fragrant curls  
Terry cylinders

Across the room  
Old white door.  
Cool and black  
Ceramic knob,  
Creaking open  
The smallest crack.

Young lion  
Shoots out  
First, flat,  
Two-dimensional.  
Fleshes out  
In late sunlight.

Lion nuzzles back of knee.  
Reach down, stroke his nose.  
Takes my right fist  
In his mouth.  
Holds it there,  
Looking at me.

**The Young Lion, Revisited**

"Well?"

My question came out jagged.

A half smile ripened his golden cheek.

He shook his head slowly,  
side to side.

My wrist bones bumped ivory fangs.

"I can't write until you let go."

Sharp, impatient.

"Uncurl your fist,"

he said. ("Oh.")

My palm brushed corduroy tongue,  
forsaking his mouth.

I sat down at the desk,

thrust my newly free finger into a bowl of blueberries,  
bruising the tip with juice.

I held it to the young lion  
to lick.

"No."

Amusement deepened his dimple to a comma.

"Rub it on the paper."

I sliced an elegant curve across white page.

Raising a violet stain

From top corner  
to opposite bottom.

### Lead Fire

Sitting in a philosophy classroom  
Only one wall  
Surrounded by woods and sunlight

An alarm sounds.

My teacher turns to his left.  
A firefighter enters our space and speaks.

*It's a lead fire coming this way.*

Has it beaded up yet?

*It has.*

Frantically writing  
(*I have* to get this down)  
Words on the page become geometric  
All black and white  
The end shape turning red  
Changing into a tiny lobster.

I scratch the end of the line,  
Lift it off the page.  
And eat it.

### The Lobster

I pull the string of geometrics from my mouth  
Forms looking like corrupted text  
The end anchored between my fingers

The tiny red lobster, leashed to its end,  
Scurries back and forth, with swaying shape trail behind  
He leaps up, is jerked back.

Suddenly the lobster turns,  
With one huge claw  
Severs his weighted prison-line.

He sits back  
Pulls out a cigarette  
Unfiltered, longer than his body,  
And lights it.

(Inhale.)  
*You have a choice here, y'know.*  
Puffs of smoke punctuate each word.

Choice about what?

*Think harder.*  
His free claw pulls tobacco bits from his tongue.  
He flicks them away.

To write?  
To feel?  
Or to swallow?

(Inhale.)  
*It all comes clear in the end.*  
(Exhale.)  
He crushes his cigarette out.

I look back at the string in my fingers,  
Still shiny from my spit.  
The squares and the triangles have gone curvy, and some are leaves.

## Rubedo

I pick up a pen and write until my hand feels numb,  
concentrate to make the fingers work.

My hand falls off at the wrist,  
pen still clutched in fingers,  
little jerking movements,  
scratching stick lines.

My other hand.

Take a book off a shelf (I'll find help inside).

The book falls open to a glossy center page.

I slip into the photograph of keyboards,  
type with my left hand,  
letters too small to see,  
hit "print" with my right nub arm.

The printer whines and rattles,  
grows too large for its table,  
burning ink smells into the air.  
falls very slowly...

reaching to catch pulls off my left arm.

Room sized, purple and red tape recorder.

Bought yesterday at the store with brightly colored machine tools.

I poke "record" with my toe,  
fall forward onto my face  
into green shag carpet that sprouts,  
becomes grass.

My legs walk off without me.

Still thinking, words forming in my brain.

A knight on a dark horse barrels towards me  
holding a giant souvenir pencil like a lance,  
jams the pencil into the side of my head,  
clicks on my teeth inside my mouth.

My ear feels warm and wet.

I turn my head and perceive letters pouring out on the floor  
mixed with gray slime (my brain).

My husband walks through a transparent door  
scoops up my words and ooze,  
pops them into my mouth,  
starts shaking my shoulders.

### III. IN STRENGTH

## Gato

In the early morning Phoebe awoke to the sound of Gato's toenails clicking impatiently on the kitchen tile. She slid out of bed and padded quietly to the kitchen.

Her whispered question, "Do you want to go out?" flipped on a switch in her old dog; Gato rocked back and forth from one front foot to another, wagging his tail with meek vigor. His tail began to strike the clothes dryer like a gong.

"Shhhh!" Phoebe hissed as she struggled to subdue the tail alarm and open the back door. Gato slipped cautiously out, and she watched through the tiny center circle of the beveled, glass-topped door. Gato hesitated at the top of the steps and gingerly made his way down, limping off the last step.

She moved to look down to the end of the hall. She sighed relief--her husband hadn't heard. She returned to the glass circle at the top of the door. Phoebe's eyes focused on the trees that lined their back yard. Autumn was her favorite season; the colors were unbearably beautiful to her. An expectation that the colors would go on forever never quite died in Phoebe. She was always surprised when the inevitable first snow came.

Phoebe looked back at Gato. He was now moving restlessly pacing in front of the back deck stairs, stopping now and again to put a front foot on the bottom steps before returning to the same nervous movements.

Wrapping her eggshell blue chenille robe more tightly around her, Phoebe

opened the door and tiptoed down the steps. By holding Gato around his body and straining upwards, she encouraged the old dog to make his way up the steps. His bony shoulder pressed against her abdomen. With great difficulty, the two of them conquered the top step. She reached for the doorknob, and stood up to find her husband standing at the window, watching. The bright sun glittered in his dark eyes.

\* \* \*

"Good morning, honey," she said, after she had opened the door. She glanced away from his eyes and kissed his cheek. "What do you want for breakfast?" Phoebe laid her head on Max's shoulder. Gato squeezed by them, his tail reverberating again on the dryer.

"Phoebe, we've got to talk." Max reached down and brushed aside Phoebe's feathery brown hair.

"Hmmm?" said Phoebe. She slipped away from her husband. "Max, you know, I think I'm getting a cold--do we still have any cold medicine? May we could go out for donuts and stop at the drug store on the way home. How 'bout that?"

Max watched her flit around the kitchen. He put one hand on his hip, stroked his slightly graying mustache, and surrendered a sigh. "Phoebe, listen. Gato is over seventeen years old. He can't even get up the steps by himself any more. I don't like to see him in pain."

She stopped with her hand on an open cupboard door and spoke toward Max's feet. "It's just that this morning's a little colder, that's all. I can give him a little aspirin, just like always. He'll be fine." She pulled her eyes up to meet his, but only for an instant. "He'll be fine," she repeated, emphasizing her last spoken word.

"All right," said Max. "All right." He walked over behind his wife, and pulled her long hair back behind her shoulders, and placed his head beside hers so he could talk directly into her ear. "I've got to go in this morning to do a little tying up loose ends at the office, so I won't be able to go for coffee or donuts or anything. But, Phoebe, listen," he said as he turned her around and slid his hands down her arms to her hands. He put one hand under her chin and tilted it up so he could look directly into her wide gray eyes. She kept her lids lowered. Max was not a particularly large man, but next to Phoebe he towered. And he was not above using his size to emphasize a point. "We have to talk about this later."

Phoebe pulled her face up and out of his hand. "Kay," she said softly.

\* \* \*

Phoebe dropped Max off at the imposing office building where he'd worked for the whole twelve years they'd been married. She drove around the block and pulled into the massive seven-level parking garage; downtown was lonely on Saturdays, and parking places were plentiful. Her footsteps echoed on the metal steps, reminding her of Gato's tail on the dryer. She came out of the back of the garage into an austere alleyway.

Three blocks later, Phoebe found herself at the bottom of weathered, wooden steps. She carefully toed a cricket out of her path before ascending to the glass topped doorway. The paint on the door was chipped white over faded wood, and the ancient tarnished doorknob protested her entry with a loud creak. The intricate gold lettering on the coffee shop entrance sparkled in the sun. A ribbon of brass bells jangled as Phoebe went in. The proprietor looked up from polishing her set of mismatched glassware and smiled warmly.

"Beebee!" cried Liz, walking over and kissing her cheek. "How's my favorite girl?" Liz leaned back with her hand still on the back of Phoebe's neck. "God, you look skinny. Don't you ever eat anything?"

"I'm fine. Liz, did you get your hair cut shorter again?" Phoebe reached up and ran her fingers across Liz's bangs. She had only a fringe of gray strands with the rest sheared closely to her head.

Liz pulled her small round glasses down her nose, looking over the top of the gold wire frames at Phoebe. "What do you expect? I've got a strong image to project here." Liz glanced over to the corner of the shop and winked at a redheaded woman who stopped wiping a table long enough to return the tender look. Liz turned back to Phoebe, took her hand and walked her over the table for two by the expansive front window. "Sit down, sweetie. Allie, get our girl some coffee, okay?" The redheaded woman obliged.

"What's with you today, Beebee? You're not the regular sunshine girl we both know and love." Liz reached down while she was talking to stroke the tiny body of a poodle that was snoring away in a tattered wicker basket in the window seat. The tiny dog lifted its head for a moment, made a soft smacking noise, and lay back down.

"It's nothing, really." Phoebe attempted to brush off Liz's gaze by fluttering her hand in front of her own face.

Liz deepened her voice. "Don't make me get rough with you, sweetie. I said 'talk.'"

"Kay. Well...it's like this. I mean, it's just that...just...ummm...Gato's gotten a lot worse. He can't even get up the back steps any more. Max thinks we need to...to...you know." Phoebe nodded at Allie to thank her for the coffee. She wrapped both palms

around the mug to warm her chilled fingers.

Liz leaned back in her chair, and stroked her knuckles across the forearm of Allie, who was standing closely behind Liz.. "Hon, hand me a piece of paper, will you?" Allie walked across the creaky wooden floor, reached behind the counter, and pulled out a tablet. She returned to place both pencil and paper in Liz's outstretched hands. She stood behind Liz with her hand on Liz's shoulder, looking over at the basket in the window.

Liz scribbled a name and number on the gray paper. "Our vet won't even put animals to sleep. She doesn't believe in it." She handed the slip to Phoebe. "That reminds me," said Liz. "Allie, honey, will you get me Sappho's pills?" Allie turned to face Phoebe. A burden settled into Allie's face.

Allie crossed the room to an antique roll top desk in a dark corner and retrieved a small amber colored bottle. She handed it to Liz, who held Allie's hand for a moment, with the tiny phial separating their palms. Their hands fell apart. Allie walked back behind the counter and turned her back to them.

Liz reached over to retrieve the miniature poodle still sleeping in the window. "These are for her epilepsy," said Liz and she fished out a substantial red pill from the brown glass. "She hates this part," said Liz, as she pried open the little dog's jaws and forced the pill on the tip of her finger into her mouth. Liz clamped her hand over the poodle's muzzle and stroked the tiny throat. Sappho snorted and swallowed. "This medicine's a godsend." Liz laid the poodle back in her basket; she immediately fell back asleep. Phoebe finished her coffee and decided to go home.

\* \* \*

Gato greeted Phoebe as she came in the front door of their house. He was

still favoring one of his back legs over the other. Phoebe , followed closely by Gato, went into the kitchen and got a bottle of white tablets from the top of the refrigerator. She opened the magnet- and photo-covered door and pulled out a piece of cheese wrapped in cellophane. Phoebe carefully unwrapped the slice and balled up half of the cheese around the aspirin. She tossed the morsel to the already anticipatory mouth of Gato. He chomped down, then seemed to smile widely, with his lips curling far back against his teeth. After a few gagging noises, he looked up again. She balled up the remainder of the cheese around another aspirin and tossed it to him. Gato let it fall to the floor, sniffed it, and then looked up expectantly at Phoebe.

"So I guess I'm not fooling you any more, huh?" Phoebe asked as she stroked Gato's head. "Maybe you'd better just go lie down." Gato slunk over to their multi-colored rag rug and circled his particular lying down spot a few times before gently lowering himself to the floor. He reached over with his jaws to gather in a dirty neon green tennis ball.

Phoebe heard a car pull into the driveway followed by voices and a slamming door. The vehicle pulled away; Max was home. She reached over and flipped on the radio to the local "oldies" station. "Oh, very young," warbled Cat Stephens to Phoebe as she quickly got out some bread to make French toast for lunch. Maybe a favorite lunch would distract Max.

Max came in, kissed her cheek, and said, "Did you have fun at Liz's? I would have called but Rob was there, and he gave me a ride home." Max went over to the huge bag of dog food by the washer and dryer. He reached down in and used the chipped porcelain cup to get a cup full of dry pellets for Gato. The rustling of the bag and

the rattle of the pellets as they ricocheted around the plastic dog dish signaled Gato that lunch was served.

Phoebe looked over to study the process of Gato's rising. First, the front legs, followed by a few rocking motions. Inertia dragged up the back legs. Gato looked up and caught her gaze. He dropped his head and hobbled over to the dish Max had filled.

Max stood up, letting the porcelain cup dangle from his finger.. He watched Gato eat for a moment, then he looked at Phoebe hoping to catch her eye. She wouldn't look up. Phoebe was setting the table, humming softly along with Cat Stephens, while the French toast hissed on the stovetop. Max set the cup down and walked over to his place at the table and sat down. Phoebe pulled out the first two slices and finished putting a third and fourth slice of egg-soaked bread into the pan. When Phoebe brought the original slices of French toast to the table, she saw Max's jaw and neck muscles tense. He looked down at his hands, and the tension left him. He put a slice of toast on his plate, and then on hers. She turned back to the stove.

Phoebe flipped the remaining toast in the pan, while she looked over at the bony backside of Gato. Every third bite or so he stopped to force out a hacking sound. She crossed to the refrigerator to get the syrup. The cheese wrapper was still on the countertop. Phoebe reached in her pocket to retrieve the phone number of Liz's vet, crumpled it up in her fist along with the cellophane, and threw them away.

Phoebe sat back down. She looked at Max. "Maybe..." she started. She looked down. She pushed food around her plate. "Kay," she murmured at Max. He reached across the table and closed his hand around hers. Phoebe's cheeks flushed, and she looked directly at Max.

\* \* \*

Phoebe ate very little of her lunch. Gato finished his dry food and immediately focused his attention on Phoebe. Phoebe cut the bread left on her plate into little pieces and fed them to her old dog one at a time. She concentrated on the sound of Gato's teeth clicking against the fork as he tenderly took the food from her. Click. Chew. Swallow. Clickety-click. Chew. Swallow. He looked so different from the robust dog she had been introduced to when Max and she were beginning to date. Phoebe noticed that Gato's eyelashes were white.

\* \* \*

Max made an appointment with their own veterinarian, Dr. Jeller, for very early the next Saturday morning, so early that no other pet owners would bear witness. As Phoebe rode to the vet's, she tried to suppress any sensation. She had decided not to experience the morning at all. When she felt the tears burn up and out, she pressed her cold fingers to her eyes and pushed them back inside. "I can do this," she told herself. She looked back to see Gato with his head hanging out the window, his lip curled back in the wind, flapping up moist pink and black-rimmed. Gato snorted as the air pushed into his nose.

Before they even got to the clinic, Gato was shivering with nervousness. Usually a trip to the vet had this effect on him. They got him out of the car, keeping him on his short leash. Gato sniffed and pissed on each brick corner of the building and also on the giant red fire hydrant that stood next to the huge sign painted with cartoon animals. They dragged him inside.

A bored nurse glanced up as they walked in. She had her black hair teased and

sprayed into a small fan rising from the front of her forehead. She pushed the buzzer to call the doctor and returned to methodically chewing her gum.

Phoebe watched Gato struggle to sit down on the cold cement floor in the empty waiting room. He circled around and around, trying once to sit and yelping sharply. He circled again and let his old rump fall with a thud. He put his head on Phoebe's knee for a moment and lifted it, leaving dog spit in the shape of a "V" on her blue jeans. Phoebe studied the gilt frame of the painting of geese hanging on the far wall of the room.

Dr. Jeller came through the door next to the picture and called, "Gato? Gato? How ya doin', boy?" Gato responded to his name by thumping his tail enthusiastically on the cement floor. The vet adjusted his thick glasses. "We're ready."

Phoebe and her husband followed down a blinding white corridor. Phoebe concentrated on the sound of Gato panting and the swish of Dr. Jeller's polyester encased thighs. Phoebe had previously nicknamed him "Dr. Jell-O." He stopped at the room marked "LBORATOY" and stood outside holding the door, looking at a clipboard. Obviously the letter "A" and the letter "R" weren't missed by anyone. The doctor walked in followed by Gato, Max, and then Phoebe.

As Phoebe crossed the threshold, she gasped. The room smelled of alcohol and animal hair. It had one metal table with a dirty green flannel covering on it in the middle of the room. Max helped Dr. Jeller lift Gato onto the table.

"You keep your fat hands off him," Phoebe thought to herself, but she said nothing. She watched the vet fill the syringe full of pale pink liquid. The room became dazzlingly bright. Dr. Jeller's arm strained against the material in his sleeve as he squirted a little of the liquid out of the end of the needle. "Are you ready?" he asked,

with the needle poised in the air. Phoebe pressed her lips tightly together and put her hand under the soft, velvety jowls of Gato. She looked toward Max's downcast eyes and looked away.

Phoebe felt Gato jerk with the prick of the needle going deep into his flank. "I can still slap that out of his hands," she thought. But she didn't. Instead she watched the pudgy hands forcing the pink liquid into Gato's veins. She looked in Gato's eyes to see them turn to glass; she felt the weight of his head push her hands to the dirty green flannel.

\* \* \*

The doctor told them they could have a few minutes before leaving. Max hung his head for a moment, rubbed his eyes, and shook his head side to side. Then he carefully scooped up their dog's limp body in his arms and carried it out the back door. Phoebe mechanically opened the trunk and Max laid Gato carefully on the blanket she had put there earlier that morning. Max closed the trunk and they drove home, not speaking.

They arrived home about five minutes later. Max got out of the car and went around to open Phoebe's door. She sat, staring ahead, making no sound but an occasional chirp-sounding sob. Max took her hand and pulled her gently out of the car. Phoebe went immediately to open the trunk. She leaned on her husband's shoulder while he took Gato out of the trunk. He carried the body to their back yard.

While Max dug a hole in the back yard, Phoebe slowly recovered Gato's rug, tennis balls, various rawhides. She also located the weeping cherry tree she and Max had decided to plant over Gato. Phoebe hauled them to the back yard. Every muscle in her

body felt bruised.

Phoebe turned a corner, and found Max digging furiously into the dark earth. The shovel fulls of dirt flew over his shoulder into the crisp air, raining on the brown leaves covering the ground. Some of the dirt flew toward her and stung the skin of her cheek. Eventually Max began to slow his pace, exhausting himself. He stepped out of the hole.

Max laid Gato out in his typical nap position. His head on his paws, tennis balls arranged around his white muzzle--Phoebe thought she saw him move. She waited, staring at the seemingly sleeping dog. She felt a sharp stabbing pain over her eye, then began to drop his toys into the hole one by one, waiting for each one to settle before dropping the next one. Max moved behind his wife's back, put his hands on her shoulders, and settled his chin so he could speak into her ear. "I'm going into the house and clean up some things. Phoebe, you plant the tree, okay?" Max's voice raised in pitch slightly. Phoebe pulled one of her shoulders away.

Phoebe felt Max's hands slide off her body. He turned and moved towards the house. She ran the back of her hand to the throbbing pain over her eyebrow, feeling the grit of the dirt that was stuck to her face, and sighed. She kneeled down and started shoving heaps of cold earth into the hole. The thudding sound of it comforted her. She placed and adjusted the tiny tree, pressing soil around it. She stood up and circled the grave, scrutinizing the pattern of her small handprints in the earth. She pulled the back of her dirty hand under her nose and decided to go in.

\* \* \*

Inside the house Max was moving from room to room like a pinball. In his arms he had collected the items that were Gato's that Phoebe had evidently missed. Max

stopped short when he saw her, and before continuing, said, "How many fucking toys and balls and dishes are lying around this house?" Max stormed on and Phoebe followed him complacently, soaking in his torrent of words. "I mean, are there any more of these stupid, smelly, slimy tennis balls around here? The garbage man comes tomorrow, and we have got to get this stuff *out* of here." He stopped by a crumpled up bag of dog food and grabbed for it, toppling the bag and dropping most of the articles he had previously gathered. "God damn it!" he thundered as he let the rest of the items fall. He glared at the floor. "Aren't you going to help me at all?"

Phoebe placed her hands, one at a time, still covered with fresh earth, on either side of his face, to look directly into his eyes. His agitation ceased, and his chin tremored. He dropped his head to her shoulder and sobbed. Phoebe stood on her tiptoes and attempted to stretch her arms to encircle him, pulling him to her, with her fingertips just managing to touch.

#### IV. IN WEAKNESS

## Phil

The clock radio blared 5:21 a.m., blinking to the strains of "Aquarius" and love steering the stars. "Crap," he said and smacked the snooze button. He closed his eyes for less than an instant, then the radio jolted him again. "Let.....the sunshine...let....the sunshine in..." the Fifth Dimension wailed at him. "All right, all right...shut the fuck *up*." Her preempted them by hitting the off button with a fist.

After his lengthy shower, twenty-five-year-old Phil carefully contoured his dark brown goatee into its most sophisticated form. He checked the evenness of the beard's edges by turning his head slowly from side to side. He had recently concluded that this was the look that would get him somewhere--the look of someone who was destined for bigger things. Yes sir, that looked good. He rinsed out the sink and watched that mornings' beard clippings disappear in a vortex down the sink drain.

He went into his bedroom closet and carefully picked his clothes for the day. Jammed in the back of the closet, taking up space and hangers, were the looks and styles of previous seasons, hidden behind the new ones. Phil prided himself on keeping up with what clothes were contemporary. "Looks make them look," he was always saying.

Phil looked out his window towards the dark gray skies. As he attempted to achieve the perfect knot on his tie, the sun rose just enough behind the corner of the brick warehouse next door for him to see its sharply edged outline in the hazy sky. A plastic bag flew by his window, scraping the glass. It was always colder up north. He grabbed a roll of Roloids on his way out.

After stopping to get a massive cup of Dunkin' Donut coffee, he hustled toward the waiting bus marked, "Downtown," adjusting his coat collar to keep out the cold. He walked up the steps and disinterestedly down the aisle. A number of sleepy regular morning riders nodded at him in recognition. He mentally categorized his fellow passengers as he moved toward the back of the bus. "Loser, loser, *real* loser...I hope there aren't many more stops. I gotta get to work." Thank God he wouldn't be doing this that much longer, and when he had a car of his own, he would be able to forget ever being on the bus.

He sat down in the back seat, and concentrated on his coffee. An old lady who was dozing in front of Phil shifted in her seat. A snap unfastened on her flowered smock. "Je-sus" he said under his breath as he leaned over and snapped it closed again, grimacing with the effort to be as quiet as possible. She smelled like lavender and vinegar, and her hands looked red and worn. Phil thought back to when he was growing up at his grandmother's, where his mother had left him after the divorce. He remembered the bicarbonate of soda that smelled faintly of vinegar that his grandmother was always giving him, holding him still to drink it by putting her hand on his shoulder. He pulled a Roloids tablet out of his pocket, leaned back with his head against the cold metal of the bus while he chewed it, and concentrated on the scenery.

He watched the familiar industrial park buildings and warehouses whiz by his window, counting off the exact six bus stops to get to his. He looked at the back of the heads still waiting for their stops, bouncing back and forth passively to each pothole. "Finally," he said to himself as they all arrived at his stop. He walked down the aisle in large gulping steps and exited. Once outside in the vast parking lot, he squinted up

towards the dark, copper-colored sky. His hair whipped into his eyes, and he had to struggle to get the door into the mall open. He glanced back through the door and saw a newspaper fly by, opening and closing in the wind. He dropped his coffee cup into a trashcan at the bottom of the stairs, then headed toward the elevator.

Once in the elevator, his eyes skimmed the familiar wall of plaques, disregarding all the names of investors, renovators, builders, renters, and assorted movers and shakers in the ownership of the mall. "Just a bunch of names," he thought to himself. He checked his watch and shuffled on his feet from side to side, impatiently waiting for the elevator to get to the second floor. After various prehistoric groans and creaks, he slid out between the doors that weren't quite open.

He saw "The Empty Mug" coffee shop sign as he came around a corner about two minutes later, digging out his huge brass ring of keys to begin the tedious process of unlocking locks and gratings and doors. Before he could initiate this task, he had to negotiate a herd of senior citizen walkers that scurried by early each morning. He rolled his eyes upward after this morning's group had passed with their bubbly "Good Mornings." With keys, locks, and people out of the way, he flipped the switches to light the lights and start things brewing.

Mary, the new girl, had been working there three months and came in about a half-hour later, talking about the strong wind blowing her all over the road in her used Geo Metro. She was just nineteen and full of annoying energy. Phil noted that she had on the same bland type clothes she wore every day--plain, plain, plain. He had encouraged her to try hard to *look* like something; her simplicity bothered him. She was also exasperatingly happy this past few mornings, even when she had to come in early

and start the cream frothers and the espresso machines. They alternated who had to be in the absolute earliest, but he always felt exploited when it was his turn. He tried not to think about it. The set up before business started never really interested Phil--he would rather have someone else take care of that. He wanted to get right to the cash register drawer and get into it. He had been that way the whole six years he had been working in the shop. He reached into his pocket for another one of his Roloids.

"Hey, Phil," Mary beamed and she flicked switches and wiped counters, her short cocoa-colored hair bouncing as she worked. "Wait till I tell you about this film class I'm taking...it's incredible!" He rolled his eyes upward again, anticipating the protracted story to follow. Mary was taking classes down at the community college, and she was filled to brimming with excitement with each new class. Phil leaned forward with his elbows on the counter and his chin in his hand, attempting to tune out Mary's carbonated voice. He remembered his visit to the college advising office right out of high school. He had been working at a McDonald's, and still wearing the soiled uniform when he had gotten to the counseling office. Phil had found they weren't really interested in his skills, and there had been way too much emphasis on his deficiencies and which irrelevant classes he would have to drag through to a degree. He had decided that the process would just take way too long. He would just have to dive into the business world and get ahead while everybody else was taking stupid classes. He immediately put the experience out of his mind. Looking back always brought an uncomfortable tension into his stomach.

Phil slid back out of his reverie, with Mary prattling on about some film she had just seen. She had finished filling the different thermoses with the coffees of the day and arranged the various flavors of syrup on the counter, ready to go. "Better get ready for

the onslaught," he thought. He melted back toward the register and let Mary handle the orders at the front counter.

Between 7:30 and 7:45, a batch of other early mall retailers, bank tellers, and cinnamon-bun makers lined up for their morning fix, along with the elderly health nuts. While Mary greeted each in turn in her aggravatingly perky way, Phil worked the cash register and made the specialty orders. He could do the exotic orders considerably faster than Mary, since she had just started a few months ago. She was an able trainee, however, and was quickly getting up to speed. Pretty soon she would be better than he was.

Phil looked up. "Oh, no...not the old geezer." At the end of the line was the old man who came each morning to get his usual boring regular Colombian roast, black. He had a thick Spanish accent and was painfully slow in requesting the identical order every morning. He also didn't seem to care what he looked like--he always wore the same rumpled suit that smelled to Phil like wet brown paper bags. Phil quickly slid behind Mary and let her deal with the situation. She and the old man always seemed to have something they could talk about. This morning, for some reason, the old man glanced up and smiled at Phil. And for some reason Phil smiled back, weakly. Mary got his order and sent him shuffling and chuckling on his way to the bench in front of the percolating fountain in the center of the mall. Phil felt out of place--he tried not to think about it.

After the morning surge was over, Phil absent-mindedly turned on the radio. He turned his back on Mary while she started to organize the elements that had been disorganized during the rush. Phil grabbed a paper towel and focused on the coffee spills. Their liquid warmth seeped toward his hand, slowly transforming the white towel

to brown. He thought about his grandmother's kitchen, and how warm it had been.

The sound of the radio weather report started to drip slowly into his head. Phil then became so suddenly aware of the meaning of the ominous words, jumping as if he had been burned.

"Winds dangerously high velocity...warning conditions...seek shelter immediately..." sternly advised the commanding voice. "Shit," said Phil and turned to catch the frightened eyes of Mary, who instantly turned her attention toward the old man by the fountain. "We've got to get to the hallway in the middle of the mall, Mary, and I mean right *now*." Phil felt a surge of concern run through him; he was suddenly much older than Mary.

"Okay," replied Mary, scrunching her eyebrows upward in worry, "Let me just go get Mr. Suerte and tell him." Before Phil could stop her, she was on her way to the fountain, calling for the old man. Phil yanked down the grating of the shop and the gears ground with the effort. Phil hurried to the door of the security corridor across the mall.

"God damn it, hurry up, Mary," Phil sputtered nearly silently as he held the door open for her and the old man. Phil attempted to will them to move more quickly by making fervent sweeping motions with his arm. "Finally," Phil thought as he blew out a breath of annoyed relief. But as the old man passed him, Phil put a hand on his shoulder to guide him into the dark hallway.

Finally, the three of them were inside and seated, waiting. Phil looked around; the area was already filled to capacity with a variety of mall workers, early shoppers, and senior citizen walkers, all speaking excitedly in soft voices. A small square window in the steel door at the end of the long hallway let in the only light in the murky passage.

One of the bank tellers that had gotten coffee earlier that morning was fiddling with the dial on her small radio trying to get news of the storm warning. The sound of the announcer's voice crackled and popped as she cocked her head, listening intently. "It'll be here in another couple minutes," she said tautly. Phil watched as one of the senior citizens strove to stand up, expressing the effort in muted grunts. The man then hobbled over to the tiny window and uttered a barely audible, "Oh." Phil stood and moved to the window himself. He squinted, trying to see in the bright distance. There--over there. A dark tall twisting cloud coming toward the building they were all waiting in. He looked back down the hallway to locate Mary. She was next to the old man, talking to him in muted tones. Okay--she was safe. He shook his head at her. "You'd better watch out for yourself, Mary," he said to himself, running his hand over his churning stomach.

He looked back out the window, mesmerized by the hissing roar of the dark wind. It was impossible for him to look away from the spectacle of it--he drank in every detail as it approached. Papers, cups, leaves, and gray air all swirled and whistled towards them, threatening. Phil held his hand out, with the fingers outstretched, ready to move towards Mary when it happened. The thing simply sputtered and petered out, dissolving into thin, pallid air. Phil felt almost disappointed, a feeling which was not shared by the other people in the cramped hallway. As the teller with the radio relayed the dissipation of danger, a gurgle of relief passed through them. Phil caught sight of Mary squeezing the hand of the old man. He looked down at his feet. At least it was over.

Mary seemed distracted for the rest of their long shift at the coffee shop, which

Phil attributed to the morning's eventualities. As the grating made its last satisfying thud closing up for the night, Mary said, "Uh, Phil?" She smiled faintly. "I've got to tell you something. I've gotten another job working for Mr. Suerte starting a week from Monday. I just wanted to say that I've enjoyed working with you and if you ever..." her voice dissolved. Phil had quit listening. He thought she said a few more things before she walked away down the steps to the first floor. He hair was more bouncy than he had ever seen it. "Fuck," said Phil out loud, "Now I've got to train another one."

Phil made his way to the elevator door, and punched the down arrow. He pushed a few more times in an effort to bring it more quickly. Once in the elevator he glanced over the names he had seen that morning and tried to place one that was distilling on a back burner of his mind. Then he recognized the rumped old man's name. Phil pressed his lips into a tight line. He took a deep breath in and scowled toward the elevator buttons, congratulating himself on not getting stuck working in a cramped mall office like plain old Mary. He would get home and watch a little tube and forget the whole thing before the feeling of discomfort settled into his stomach. Then he reached down and straightened his mocha colored tie.

## VITA

Sherri Mahoney Jacobs was born Sherri Lynne Mahoney on February 20, 1961, in Montague, Michigan. After attending Muskegon Business College for two years and graduating with honors with an Associates Degree in Business in May of 1981, she embarked on an unremarkable secretarial career. She eventually moved to Tampa, Florida, working as a bookkeeper and after-school theater teacher for a small inner-city elementary school there. After two years in Tampa, she moved, married, worked, and eventually went back to school to study English. After graduating Magna Cum Laude with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in English from Central Michigan University in August of 1997, she divorced, moved back home to Montague, and started again. She entered the University of Tennessee-Knoxville in the Master of Arts degree program in English with a concentration in writing as a student and a Graduate Teaching Assistant in the fall of 1998. She now plans to graduate, remain happily married to her second husband, Michael, to teach when she can, to write as much as possible, and to simply live her life.