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PRODIGAL'S JOURNAL

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

Cynthia Langley Caruso
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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to God;
without His grace and tender mercies,
none of this would have been possible.

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My gratitude for the support and encouragement I have received from the many professors, family and friends overwhelms me. If asked to name a professor who embodies every true meaning of the word "teacher," the award would unanimously go to Dr. Marilyn Kallet for years of instruction and guidance. She helped me grow from a timid young writer into the mature voice of a poet unafraid to speak in my own language. Her criticism was always consistently candid and challenging; my respect for her fills me with appreciation.

ABSTRACT

This manuscript spans eight years of writing and a lifetime of experiences. The divisions are based upon thematic content within the poems, and the cohesive thread which binds the sections together is the distinctly southern voice in which the manuscript is written.

Empathy for someone else's pain, by speaking with their voice through the use of the persona technique, stretches the poet's imagination beyond normal limits. In "Someone Else's Voice," I use negative capability to take on the persona of the narrator, creating voices not easily accessible to me. Dream therapy, a technique sometimes practiced to help people see themselves more clearly, was the catharsis for the poems in "The Dream Poems" section. The rich details in each poem build on the subconscious qualities to lend realistic authenticity. Love poetry should have an underlying passion which speaks to the reader in subtleties. In "Token Love Offerings," lyric poems attempt to establish this quiet passion. "Spiritual Renderings" is a section encompassing poems in a variety of formats, all dealing with reflections on my faith in God. Turning inward is inevitable in poetry, and the "Looking In" section focuses on self-awareness; there is also a Spanish translation of one poem. "The Smiley Series" is a collection of dirges and elegies written about a close friend who died. "Glimpses of Others" offers poems which evoke pathos--word portraits of people and personified animals and nature. "New Poems" is a collection of four poems written over the last two months; the title poem for the manuscript appears in this section.

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INTRODUCTION

*"Poetry is the renewal of words forever
and ever. Poetry is that by which we
live forever and ever unjaded. Poetry
is that by which the world is never old."*
Robert Frost

I began writing poetry at the age of nine, my only concept at that time involving rhyme. It is not surprising that the result was a sing-song attempt written in iambic pentameter with simple, though inconsistent, rhyming quatrains. After this early writing effort, I didn't write again until I was a freshman in college. Literature studied then fascinated me, especially poets like T.S. Eliot, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, and Amy Lowell. I memorized "The Fish" by Elizabeth Bishop because I was intrigued by her finely detailed description of catching a fish. It became increasingly clear that the traditional approach to writing rhymed verse did not appeal to me. I began exploring prose writings and free verse, allowing myself the freedom not to concentrate on rhyme or meter. It was through this process that I developed an instinct for "natural" speech rhythms. I learned certain subject matter could be treated in an intensely passionate, less flowery tone by eliminating rhyme and using evocative imagery which is grounded in reality. Through a combination of both end-stopped lines and run-on lines, a suitable decorum is established for each poem.

It was not until I transferred to the University of Tennessee and enrolled in a series of writing classes, that I began to understand the meaning of paring down. With too many adjectives, or too harsh or dramatic an image, creative writing can become infested. Likewise, in technical applications or various other forms of professional communication, writing can be weighted with obscure words and phraseology, complicating the reader's

comprehension. By cross-referencing techniques from both genres, I began incorporating the clarity and readability required in technical writing into my poetry, abandoning the use of archaic or cluttered images, striking instead for those which grew out of my own experience.

The following writers have influenced my work: Cathy Song, because her work is a reminder that there are countless subjects found in the silences of flowers and people, especially women; Yehuda Amichai (in translation), whom I regard in high esteem for his thorough and passionate expression of love; Maxine Kumin, whose ability to write about Christ and her faith has encouraged me to write about my faith in Christ; Sharon Olds, who inspires me to grasp the most pertinent image when describing the inexpressible; Sylvia Plath, whose work has allowed me to assume a confessional tone in some of my poems; and Marilyn Kallet, who has taught me the value of paring my poetry.

When writing poetry, my inner voice knows when something "sounds right." As a subjective writer, I realize my most striking images have grown out of an instinct that no other words or phrases could portray what needed to be said. This intuitive diction is the foundation of my writing, and alliteration my favorite technique. The very fact that poetry has the ability to move the listener if read or recited, or the reader if printed, is testimony to its meaning. Poetry is *necessary* because it is, more than anything, life intensified on a page. Poets of the past used, as subject matter, inner responses to situations around them: love's laughter and anguish, the human spiritual struggle with good versus evil, the nature of our emotions, and external "nature" as well.

My poetry reflects many of the same subjects treated by my predecessors. My writing has matured over the years, especially since leaving the academic environment. That foundation was required, along with the ability to apply educational instruction to my craft, but the most intense expression of my work was only possible through being alive, being aware, and being alone.

SOMEONE ELSE'S VOICE

MAMA'S SONG
(to Daddy)

I. In those early days,
our bodies listened to each other.
Your sandy hands caressed my thighs,
wetness flowing over your fingertips,
milk pouring into leather.
I smelled cinnamon when Kent, our first,
was conceived, our sweat and the flesh
of that hot summer night
tousled together like warm sea breezes.

We found ways to keep on loving
despite my hard and delicate belly.
I knew then what Mama had meant
by endless roses blooming inside.
Your naked blood pounded
lonely expressions into me.
After Kent was born, my flesh
snapped back in earnest with your touch,
like flowers rebounding in sunlight
after a storm.

II. I answered Kent's cries in the night,
stifling my own, offering my breast
to him instead of you.
Then one night as the moon slid
behind clouds of pewter silk,
your thirst overcame you.
I felt your blood surge,
and smelled pine resin that night.
I knew from the sticky, sweet feel
that Cyndi, our second, had been conceived.

You would lie for hours
kissing and stroking the mountain
of flesh which harbored her,
listening for that fetal heart.
When Cyndi came, it was easy,
like a pearl falling through the sea.

III. Each morning the stillness
was interrupted by the wooden
legs of Kent's bed scraping
across the polished floor.
Cyndi's wails awakened us
in time to keep Kent from pulling out
her curls. I'd toss her
into bed with you, making breakfast,
Kent playing at my feet.

At night, after we were sure
they were asleep in each corner,
we would perform acrobatics
on the old four-poster bed.
Lorie Ann, our third, played
into my womb with the laughter
of clowns, your breath
like cotton candy on my neck.
Lying side by side afterwards,
suddenly realizing two small figures
staring quietly into the darkness
from their beds on either side of ours,
we'd break into laughter until all four
of us were giggling into the night.

IV. We had three green-eyed monsters,
with Lorie Ann on my hip,
Cyndi eating mud pies,
and Kent stealing their bottles.
I tried to remember nineteen,
my tan, lithe body
dancing in and out of your arms.
I couldn't see anything past
the clothesline, filled with diapers,
let alone remember three years before.

After rocking Lorie Ann, pacifying
Kent's whines for water, and singing
Cyndi's favorite song, you slipped
behind me in the kitchen squeezing
out the string mop one night.
I turned to see you naked,
your skin flinching when I gasped.
The floor surged to hold us,
I smelled time racing by as we slid
on the wet floor, nineteen again,
skinny dipping at the old rock quarry.

A month later I was pregnant again.
For a time, no name would come.
One morning, a red-breasted robin
perched on our windowsill.
I prayed for a brown-eyed Robin,
but he was born with eyes as blue
as China silk.

V. You frightened all four of them,
the crease between your eyes a trench.
At times I'd stare into it so hard
it became my foxhole, my imaginary
fortress from you the enemy.
Midnights took you away and I'd tuck
Robin into my bottom bureau drawer,
the others strewn around the bed
on pallets, bedroom door locked tight.

Saturdays found them taking turns
pulling each other in Kent's blue wagon
sitting on their potty chair throne,
the white and red enamel bowl
turned upside down on their heads
like a crown.

Something snapped soon after.
I wanted to be young and in love.
Instead, I was buried alive
with each turn of the spade
you called love.
It had all happened so fast.
Before I knew I was a woman,
I became a mother.

BLIND MAN'S BLUFF

When shadows step aside,
yellow jonquils flutter in a field,
I smell their soft color,
feel their long, slender leaves
wrap around them like gloves, guiding.
My wife says,
"Here, put on your coat,
it's time to go work the street."

She dresses me every morning,
taping my sign onto
the button of my overcoat.
She drives downtown,
puts me out in the bustle,
the hustle of cold wind
wrapping around me like fingers,
smoothing my fears.

On a good day, my hat is heavy,
my heart light,
escorted across the street many times,
working my way to the end
of the street and the day.

On a bad day, my hat twists
and turns in my hand,
my heart heavy.
On these days people stare
and back away.

ABANDONED

(Joseph's Story)

- I. My wife died that summer,
taking our unborn child with her.
The thick, hot feel of late August
sticking to the back of my neck,
I stared into the clay-colored pit
while the minister prayed.
His words pricked my skin
beneath the sweat.
I wanted to shout at God,
tell him to feed on her flesh
as it rotted in the ground.
I wished I had burned her
to scatter the gray into nothingness.
- II. After hating God, there was nothing.
I wandered, finding sanctuary
in a deserted church
where my auntie's wake had been
years before.
Neglect over time faded the sounds,
but I saw her casket at the front,
clear as the streetlight
illuminating darkness,
casting shadows on the bed
I had made in the dim
silence of the abandoned altar.
- Dreaming of sacrifices,
hounding preachers pounding
quiet, old Bibles,
near dawn I awoke.
Yellowed smudges
scrambled upon the dirt floor
caught the corner of my eye.
These smudges once a Bible,
lying still upon a pedestal,
now separated, nibbled
by rats, screaming at me in shreds.
Picking-up those that were whole,
I wept.

IMAGINARY FRIEND

Secret friend, where are you?
I looked in my closet,
under the bed,
but you are nowhere.
We're not playing
hide and seek.
I need to hold you,
like my teddy bear,
ragged and worn,
Mommy tries to throw away.
I love you and
Mommy hates you.

Remember the time we painted
her hobby room?
It looked so pretty and bright,
we laughed and Mommy cried.
I wish I could still see
the look in her eyes when
we brought her fuzzy flowers
from the grass, the soft,
white ball blowing away
as they reached her hand.
We cried and Mommy laughed.

I tell her you are always there,
hiding in the darkness,
especially when she is not around.
She says you get me into trouble.
She says you are
a fig bar in my magic nation.

THE DREAM POEMS

FADED BLUE DREAM

Dream ripping mind-threads
hang like white strings
around holes in my old Levi's.
Fringe drapes apart,
I'm lying in
an old wooden swing
hanging in the breezeway
of a log cabin,
nearing the end
of Faulkner's As I Lay Dying.
I want to throw
red and yellow roses on the grave
of the old woman.

Fading into blue,
someone stomps the petals
into crushed velvet, as if
to scent the earth.
Don't they know that nothing
smells so cool and clean
as dirt?
People in their coffins
look much smaller
without their spirits.

DOOMSDAY CARPENTERS

I am riding through my hometown
in the backseat of a car
driven by a stranger.
On the passenger side, in front,
my grandmother nods silently
as we drive past the country club.
All roads lead into,
away from it, just the same;
there is a stillness as coarse
and thick as the linsey-woolsey
lying in the dry-goods store.

My breath draws as I glance
where flags once marked
holes for golf: gravemarkers.
A stone woman stands in the corner,
face upturned toward us.
Her ashen gown slashes
like lightening.

Behind her, churches surround
this cemetery on three sides,
close together, like houses
in an overcrowded neighborhood.
Some have only a foundation,
others tower in completion.
Structures are the same
tall, frank columns meeting lintels,
offering rigid stress.
Overlays of ormolu adorn
outward walls with
their cheap gleam of fake elements.

My grandmother continues nodding.
She told me it would be like this
on the Day of Judgment.

SILENT INVASION

I am sitting on the cool,
mud-dirt floor of my playhouse.
My favorite doll is cradled
in cotton rags
embroidered with lace,
her plastic, azure eyes closed
whenever she is flat.
Curls, jeweled tangles of nylon,
hang yellow around the infant enamel face.
I rock her to my sighs,
the upside-down sawhorse,
boards nailed to each side, creaking.

A laugh rasps from the tiny window,
gypsy shadows rattle across the room.
The stranger says,
"Let's play doctor."
He enters my cool quiet,
grabbing her, placing his hands
between her fat plastic legs.
Blood flows from her eyes and mouth
in a thick infection.
She has been invaded by a uterus.
Dolls don't have them, I know.
He put it there.
He says with red eyes,
"She is diseased, and must go with me."
His flesh evaporates into dingy ether.

Some dreams one never forgets.

CALL ME, YOU SAID

In the middle of the night,
there's a scream.
Whirlpools rush downward
over sharp rocks;
my thoughts swirl
and plunge,
until there is nothing
but the sun's brilliance,
the image of you.

I dial your number,
but you place my dream
on hold.

TOKEN LOVE OFFERINGS

OUR BODIES

There was the time you took me
in the laundry room atop my
warm clothes fresh from the dryer.
The hammock stretching from the
maple to the weeping willow
will never again retain its shape
since our tangle there.
That spot of velvet amid the spruce
on our hike in the mountains,
so private, we made our bed
among the pine needles,
a light drizzle wet our bodies.

Once I went in search
of D.H. Lawrence's
Lady Chatterley's Lover
and found you instead
between the deserted library shelves,
and we wrote words
all over each other's body
then read them aloud.

YOU
(for Anthony)

You are a breeze blowing
warm into my heart.
Harsh rains dampen the seeds,
trample the weeds,
cannot sway the buds.

Blow into me,
hold me,
let the rain softened blossoms
caress me.

Here you are a poem
that lingers after silence,
a painting in which I find
new color.

You have painted a sky within,
a sun, a rainbow.
Your colors wash over
in unison,
leave me breathless
with no comparison.

CONCERTO

My skin is like the ivory
of piano keys.
You are the ebony which
falls between, each note
bringing us closer
to a song without lyrics.

I GAVE YOU A HEART

Broken before you,
shattered into fragments.
You bond them together,
cherishing the disfiguration,
as if it were
a precious work of art.

AFTER THUNDER

Morning thunderstorms have a way
of leaving the sky gray,
cloud mountains beneath
afternoon rivers.

Our scarlet kite cuts through,
its feathered streamers
like those of a male tanager,
gently tugging for freedom.

SEA ECHOES

I awake to the seagulls
flying above my head.

Echoes of seagulls
beckon me to swim
into your eyes
and lie with you
in a bed of pearls.
Rolling and tumbling,
the waves wash me away
from your eyes
and the sea
goes straight through you.

SPIRITUAL RENDERINGS

SILENT MEDITATION

Standing alone on this hill,
I cannot see God.
Flames lick at my skin,
a righteous current
igniting my stubborn flesh.
Face drawn tight,
heart surges upward,
it is hard to breathe.

My tears become an afternoon.
I hear the faraway rustle
of reeds in a meadow,
realizing my flesh
is alone.

I know what it's like
to hear the thunder clap,
taste the rain.
I have the tears,
my soul has color.

HIDEOUS STRENGTH

Sure, go ahead.
Another disappointment won't matter.
Blessed with a strength,
beautiful, powerful, hideous,
enduring.

I lie awake at night,
praying, weeping.
Hope threads through
my bleeding heart
with so precise a stitch,
the needle never loses patience
as it winds around the patch.

I wish for silence
not strength;
instead, You mend
and the pulse becomes
stronger.

ISOLATION

It's not the loneliness
of a spurned lover's aching heart,
nor that of a grief-filled mourner,
but lonelier even than these.

A singular magnolia blossom
on a tree of shiny leaves
waits for others
to bloom.

A stallion running wild
in the desert for years
discovers a fence placed
to end his freedom.

A broken wind chime
on a deserted back porch
whispers periodic notes
to the wind.

A silent, humble man
on a cross-bar hangs suspended
crying quietly for mercy
to His Father.

Eating Love

Angels eat love.
They season it to taste,
simmering ivy thorns
with petal nectar.

Humans eat love raw,
or burn it to a crisp,
which is why some
die of starvation.

WINTER

Early mornings dawn
in midnight colors after a rain.
Sparrows don't sing,
only blackbirds into night.
Hearts cold for warmth,
seek solitude.
Sunshine is more brilliant,
wind, more bitter,
God more somber.

SPIRIT HUNGER

At times it feels like nothing,
murmuring in rebellion,
or it begins a faraway drumbeat,
dull but resonant, the sound
of breaking waves at dawn.

You knew the quiet hunger,
strumming this silence loudest.
The music was a blend
of boards creaking under bare feet
and the slow silk of water
sliding over a crevice.

BLUES

It's the color of the sky
before a storm
that brings my heart down
to the sound of a harmonica
weeping and wailing,
or the crystal stare
of my brother's eyes,
or my soul's silent separation
from God.

LOOKING IN

MI DEBILIDAD

(for Orlando Reyes)

Poseo una debilidad por los ojos.
Ojos que siendo pozos de ternura
reflejan pensamientos.
Ojos que sonrien.
Ojos que lloran.
Ojos que hablan sin pronunciar palabras.
Ojos en los cuales puedo perderme
al tratar de conseguir alguien mas.

Sin embargo existen ojos
que no rien, no lloran,
no hablan sin palabras.
Los pensamientos que reflejan
se perciben frios e indiferentes.
Cuando uno intentaba perderse en ellos
pareciera que estuviesen hechos de vidrio.

Aun asi poseo debilidad por estos ojos tambien.
Debido a que ellos se encuentran
en los rostros de aquellos
que poseen temor, odio, y pena.
Mas que nada, ellos se encuentran
en aquellos que precisan amor,
y asi mi debilidad
se transforma en su fortaleza,
al tiempo en que ellos se pierden
en los mios, y ven.

MY WEAKNESS

I have a weakness for eyes.
Eyes that are pools of warmth
mirroring thoughts.
Eyes that smile.
Eyes that cry.
Eyes that talk without saying a word.
Eyes which I can lose myself in,
while trying to find someone else.

But there are those eyes
that do not smile, or cry,
or talk without words.
Thoughts mirrored through these eyes
seem cold, indifferent.
When you try to get lost in them
it is as if they are made of glass.

Yet, I also have a weakness for these eyes
because they are found on faces of those
who have fear, hate, sorrow.
They are found on those who need love,
and my weakness
becomes their strength,
as they get lost in mine
and see.

INVITATION TO A STABBING

I've contemplated it with the resolve
of an ant forming his hill.
Planned how, when, and with whom
I would leave the guilt.

THE SMILEY SERIES

SMILEY

(for Randy Simmerly)

Riding your palomino pony,
shooting sparks from your eyes,
I thought you would give me
an Indian war cry.
Instead, you gave me
biscuits with honey and butter
watering my mouth for a taste.

Could have smelled your tracks
many deserts away,
pegged you a wanderer,
with a nickname like "Smiley,"
the face of a Cherokee,
finely chiseled and strong,
draped in black fringe
like all brave warriors.

Drifting barefoot, seeking
the scent of wild roses and evergreen,
we avoided the thorns and needles.
I, with my steadfast realities,
grew only where nurtured by you.
You, with your wandering fantasies,
grew everywhere, intertwined with me.

SUMMER OF DEATH

Your death was
the summer of my seventeenth year,
soon after we kissed.
The newspaper said
you lay there for hours,
thrown like a puppet
from your mangled wreck,
before the farmer
came to check his fence row.

Those words ran together,
the scent of evergreen fell softly,
as I plucked the dried wild roses
from the straw cowboy hat
you had given me the week before.
Only seventeen, death had not
visited me before,
but I knew that its visit in you
would shape my summers forever.

FUNERAL FOR A FRIEND

Midnight silk
drapes your face,
white satin
envelopes you.
I weep in convulsions
of roses.

Sepulchral sounds
invade, slowly
I sink to the floor.
Black dress,
hollow eyes,
pale lips.

Your stillness
impales me.
Rising, I take
your hand,
kiss the cool
of your long,
slender fingers.

VIOLENT WIND

Dust flies
into my eyes and throat
as I wind down the narrow lane,
to Jones Hill Cemetery, Leatherwood,
bringing the scent of roses with me.

Cows stare
as I intrude through their pasture
to your grave on the hillside above.
The iron gate screeches.

Your eyes gaze into me
as I approach your face
emblazoned on the granite.
Moving from side to side
in the corner under the oak,
they watch every fallen petal
of the roses.

A violent wind spills some
petals across your mound.
Transfixed, frightened,
I turn to run,
leave them strewn.
Your eyes dare me to leave
without smelling them.

GLIMPSES OF OTHERS

PAIN

Have you ever seen the tears of a female sea turtle
 laying her eggs in a sand pit, in the dead of night?
Eggs drop from her birth canal so fast that they look
 like ping-pong balls popping in a plastic booth
 at a county fair.
Rumor has it that the tears fall as a reaction to the air;
 I believe they are shed for offspring she will never see.
Paradoxical scientific evidence states that once males
 enter the sea, they never leave it; instead, they wait
 offshore in the moonlight, removed from the pain.
Even if she wanted to scream, she couldn't count on him
 to come to her in comfort.
So the tears gush in continuous streams, causing grooves,
 the shadows forming a human countenance which simply
 accepts, giving life.

IN MOURNING

(for William Luz)

There were stars.
Even if the moon had not
glowed an eerie yellow,
he would have been able
to see the empty pond.
She had been missing all day.
As he tread around the edge
gliding past the pampas grass
and azaleas, thick with blossoms,
he puzzled over why the cygnets
had not been brought forth.
All day and into the night,
he pondered this.

In the gray, dew hours, he realized
the dawn would not bring her.
He swam soft and quiet
to the small island mound
in the pond's center.
Their palmetto-frond nest
seemed dry without her soft down
to moisten the leaves.
Still, he curled into them
stretching his long neck around
his trembling, weary body.

We found him in morning,
his graceful neck limp,
nestling in the underside
of his down,
his golden, crooked beak
with its black bulb
a contented countenance.

Autopsy reports indicated
no foul play, no disease.
We had taken her
with birth complications
to hatch her cygnets in the barn.
There was no way to tell him,
and he wouldn't
go on living without her.

OLD MAN
(for Harry)

*"I tell you the truth, whatever you
did for one of the least of these
brothers of mine, you did for me."
Matthew 25:40*

The first time I saw him
digging in our garbage
in early spring,
he reeked of whiskey,
gave a glazed grin,
lines like a map
leading away from his eyes.

We fed him from a garden
of potatoes, green beans, corn.
After supper and bath,
Dad's worn pants,
with shirts missing buttons,
were his "favorite things," he said.

A bed prepared for him
on inflated plastic floats,
with thrown patchwork quilts
on top to make a pallet,
I'd sit up late at night
after he slept,
sketching his wrinkles.

For months, thus.
That winter,
his weary face stopped.
I see him in the dark,
call out to him when I feel stifled,
starving.

FALL

Wind whips through the night,
whispers to the trees,
while fallen leaves rustle
with the notes of rice-paper,
wondering which hue
will fall first.

MANIC DEPRESSIVE
(for Caroline)

When I found her in the laundry room
of the William Blount Hotel,
she was melancholy, drawing stick men
and rainbows with coloring pencils,
small and thin as toothpicks.

Filthy, mouse-colored hair,
full of cockleburs, framed her freckles
like ragged curtains hung
in a dingy house.
Her laugh strung saliva
from roof to tongue.

"My grandma was in a institution,
my mama was in a institution, now I know
I'm gonna be in a institution."
Unkempt, something stirred within
a hazy murmur scenting her brain.

Suddenly cornered, her outburst hanging
she touched my hair, lifting it to sniff.
"Them people down at that mission
knows I got mental problems.
They just want to smash me, 'cause they
think I'm ignernt, but I thank I'm a genious.
Sometimes I spit and get hateful,
but I can figure people out real good.
Just 'cause I run around don't mean
I don't know 'bout Jesus.
God told me not to let them hypocrites
run over me. My brother don't want to
help me 'cause he's a fancy lawyer."

A week later, it was Easter.
I appeared at her door with a small basket,
containing shampoo, a pretty card, jelly beans.
"I guess Jesus does love me after all,"
was all she said, slowly shutting the door.

SISTERS

You've come a long way
from the days of Barbie and Ken,
and trying on Mother's sexy nightgowns.
Remember those plastic high heel shoes?
We would wear them to dance
on the ledge of the dining room bay window.
We never minded being trapped
inside because of rain;
that's when we became stars of a show
we wrote, directed, acted.

Now, everytime we embrace
we explode into powder
like two torn tulips.

LELIA

(for Daddy's Mama)

I learned today that my love
for making dresses from
soft, cotton sheets
was not my own idea.
Years before, with
gnarled fingers you sewed
for children you hadn't borne,
but were mother to by circumstance.

Did your man give you love?
Did he rise and call you blessed?
Did you lie with him without a cry
from your wounded heart?
Did you knead your silence
into the soft warmth of your bread,
or did it harden as it reached
your lips and crumble your dreams?

They read Proverbs 31 at your funeral
because you embodied its verses.
You never tired of smiles and strength.
I never knew you, and my father,
your son,
won't let me embrace even your name
for my child.

GRANDFATHER'S PORTRAIT

When he was three his mother died.
He crawled under the porch, far back
where the damp earth filled his lungs,
refusing to come out when the neighbor woman
came to dress him for the funeral,
stubborn even then.

It's a wonder he can see at all.
He rubs his fingers around and around
both sides of the lenses in his eyeglasses,
assures me he is "cleanin' 'em."
Without them, his eyes shine clear and blue.
Toothless smiles begin with his whiskered chin,
folding out like a rough tapestry in creases.

He cannot read or write, his gray, old face
grinning as he asks me to read something
because he can't "see it."
His overalls hang on him until they're stiff.
My grandmother can't get him to take them off
for washing. He gets new ones every Christmas,
tucking them away in a drawer, "savin' 'em."

I inherited that iron stubbornness, tender heart,
the defiant way he stands in front of the fire.
He gives me old, worn overalls to paint in,
fresh strawberries and sunken, tobacco kisses,
promising me I can paint his gray, weathered barn
when he dies, but for now, he's "preservin' it."

NEW POEMS

PRODIGAL'S JOURNAL

Today, I intended to show
faithfulness,
but the earth is in an uproar,
sea tossing, pier swaying
beneath me.
If I died right now,
would I go to hell, God?
Would your mercy and light
flee from my grasp?
If this pier suddenly ripped
from the ocean floor
would I suck salt into lungs,
entangle in kelp and seaweed,
all air ceasing?

I race sea down shore,
dodging kelp washed there,
where foam dries fast
when sea leaves.
Wind picks it up,
white phantoms
tumbling across sand;
I reach the rocks
before waves crash,
sand sticks in the water
of my eyes. I want to see
Jesus reaching out
of sand, sky, waves,
nothing there
except goodness and light,
clear perception, unsalted and pure.

ENRAPTURE

The wind on Piney Creek Road
blows like a whistle.
In the direction of the sun,
I catch the long, white spire
of a steeple
on the distant hillside.
Although I try,
I can't find the road
which leads to it.
Like a cyclist
extending muscles into a stiff lock
to gain momentum up a hill,
my brain pedals faster.

As if in answer,
the road appears between
Sunrise Cemetery and a holly tree,
still thick with winter-red berries.
Braking, my heart lurches
into the air.

SILENCE OF SOUND

"Sound is lazy,"
my husband, the sonarman says.
"Sounds propagate in oceans
for years, seeking
the least resistance."

This long silence has begun.
It stretches across years
and oceans, my heart.
Even if we go for days
without speaking when you're here,
at least I have the sound
of your footsteps.

ESCAPE TO VARNVILLE
(for Hugo)

It was higher ground we were seeking.
Lowcountry looks up to sea level
as mentor,
unable to see above it.
Its refined soil
would not stand your fury.
Knowing within an hour
your eye would penetrate,
we ran from the gusty messengers.

Morning hung on splintered pines,
the smell filling our lungs
with destruction
as we cautiously made our reentry.
Like a rape victim
who, at first glance,
doesn't appear degraded,
when shock wears thin,
shows the depth and breadth
of scars,
the city lay scattered.

A barren heap of concrete and lumber,
hoisted sails which tried to weather,
trees twisted from their roots,
were our greetings.
Photographs smiling of happier times
wavered in limp survival,
a street sign wore someone's dress,
thick mud suspended
a baby's Bambi clothes hanger
between shattered bark.
In spite of the rage, I still loved
that part of you called wind.

VITA

Cynthia Langley Caruso was born in Columbia, Tennessee on October 6, 1960. She graduated from Columbia Central High School in 1978. The following September she entered Columbia State Community College, majoring in pre-Law. Graduating with an Associate of Science in 1980, she transferred to the University of Tennessee at Knoxville and majored in English. She received a Bachelor of Arts in English from the University of Tennessee in June 1982.

She was scheduled to enter the University of Tennessee Law School in the fall of 1982, but an encounter with near-fatal cancer changed those plans. Instead, she enrolled as a graduate student in English, with emphasis in Creative and Technical Writing.

After completing graduate coursework in 1984, she began work on her creative writing thesis in the genre of poetry. In the summer of 1985, with more than half the thesis complete, she left the University, not returning until 1990. She completed her thesis and received a Master of Arts degree with a major in English in August 1991.

The author is currently employed by Trident Technical College as an instructor in English in Charleston, South Carolina. She also has an established freelance writing career.