To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Rose Elaine Becallo, entitled "The Caldron's Reply." 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

Marilyn Kallet,
Major Professor

We have read this thesis
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THE CALDRON'S REPLY

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Rose Elaine Becallo

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ABSTRACT

The first chapter, which takes its title from the title poem, consists of poems which originated or developed from dreams. Many of these poems came as a result of a class I took from Dr. Kallet entitled Dreamworks, in which I wrote poetry based on dreams I recorded in a dream journal. Some of the poems in the chapter came as the result of daydreams, so the waking world influenced this work as well.

The second chapter, "At the Nightsitter's," is based primarily on characters and personalities which are developed from real people in my childhood, or from people imagined. Some of these poems deal with family issues such as divorce, growing up, and motherhood.

The final chapter is a collection of poems that have some sort of overriding formal quality, whether the form be sonnet, rimas dissolutas, light verse, or simply blank verse. Many of these poems were stimulated by a course, Forms of Poetry, taught by Dr. Art Smith. These poems may very well overlap in subject matter with the other chapters, and other poems in previous chapters invariably employ formal techniques.

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INTRODUCTION

While most of us would agree that the reason we write is to communicate, I often speculate as to why some of us feel the urge to write in the genre of poetry. After all, poetry is not as widely read as fiction, perhaps because poetry usually requires more effort on the reader's part. Poetry, then, starts from some other, more selfish motivation.

While I want others to understand my writing, I want to communicate ideas, feelings, and imagery in a more potent way than in prose. That way for me is poetry. Why is this urge selfish? Because, while my poetry is rarely allusive or cryptic, within this genre I can define things in my own terms, follow my own impulses, and create my own worlds.

My poetry is diverse in style because I am not committed to one school of poetics. While I am curious about how form works to convey the content of the poem, I do not feel that all poetry must be in strict formal verse. And as far as subject matter is concerned, I do not want to feel confined by any norms or traditions which dictate whether or not subjects are poetic. Contemporary poets are constantly challenging these traditions, constantly opening more options to poets, and I enjoy exploring those options. However, I still find myself writing some strictly formal verse from time to time because I feel that there is much to learn from those forms.

The most unifying aspect of my poetry is its rhythm. Rhythm plays an important part in all poetry, and when I write poetry, rhythm is invariably the starting place. Often the rhythm will be there in my mind before any definite words come. The most memorable example of this occurred when I wrote "Poem in Love with Herself." This poem began when I was walking, and the rhythm of the walking was in my mind before I had any words. Since I wrote that poem, I have studied critical theories of semiotic or pre-womb language, and I believe that such a language is akin to what comes about in many of my poems. While the meaning of a poem is extremely important in my view, subject matter can be completely misrepresented by an unsuitable rhythm. On the other hand, a poem's meter can contradict its meaning to create tension. We find infinite rhythms in daily life--the heartbeat of a mother a child hears in the womb, the meandering calls of a mocking bird, the whirring of a refrigerator late at night. Rhythm is vital to all we experience, and in my method of composing poems I find it to be a key consideration.

Simile and metaphor are unique ways of renaming what we already know in order to discover new facets of a thing's existence. I find that many of my metaphors and similes are based on images of flowers, perhaps because I have been named "Rose." Trying to fit the metaphor to my life, to the lives of others, I have become fascinated with the unhuman

world of things which so occupied poets such as William Carlos Williams, Pablo Neruda, Francis Ponge, and others. For me, it is a challenge and source of discovery to try and remove human connotations from the world, to consider "the thing itself.

In addition to object poetry, there are many personal poems in my thesis--dramatic monologues, love poems, narrative-type poems, and poems dealing with family life and motherhood. These poems are very much grounded in the human experience.

To me poetry is a language unlimited in subject matter, unrestrained by tradition, open to all voices and persuasions, waiting for further discovery. While a writer is not limited in her choices, she must cultivate an awareness of the reader. In developing an aesthetic sensibility, she must never be afraid to ask--What is beauty? What is art? How are these things identified? What is their source? What is their worth? These questions are the basis of all serious artistic endeavor, and when a poet is willing to constantly ask them, then she is unlimited in her creative powers.

THE CALDRON'S REPLY

THE CALDRON'S REPLY

My ladle clangs against her walls and she cries
"BOUM! . . . HMM . . . HMM . . . hmm."
Her voice travels round and round her lip.

"Deep is my cavern,
wider and blacker, thicker
than this night.

Talk into where I have cradled
hot boiling lye,
the scent lingering in my pores.

Take hold of the rim of me, the gristle
of my cast-iron edge, worked up
through the blazes of old toils.

If you ask, I will talk of the long night past,
of my mother's vein within the clay. The crusty black
flakes from my walls. My ore dies in air."

SENZA

Without you here,
the window invites me to see dusk--

The patterned birds of late November,
the withered witch grass of early evening.

I watch dogs in the yard, ignoring the cold,
inspecting mysterious prospects in the bushes.

And the stars show in the sky beyond the street lights,
dim imaginations which brighten into diamonds on water.

I conjure you as headlights in the distance come closer.
I lose focus in their brightness as shadows of the dogs go.

DREAM VOYAGE

Holding your body and dreaming of boats, I am anchored
by your long, thin waist. I am well grounded
in placid dreams of the sea.

We sail with no point in mind, no concern
for finding land. I see your tropical maps
fluttering on the table, your compass tipping.

Then you decide to clean your long, old muskets,
tediously oiling them, squinting hard
down their blue-black barrels. You hum

to yourself in soft tenor. The melody fills
the close cabin. We pitch in the waves,
and I lie in the hammock, swaying and turning

in sleep. I am losing my sea legs, losing sight
of the porthole's glimpse of a small circle of sky.
Holding your body and dreaming of boats, I am anchored.

GRAPES, OR THE ORIGIN OF DIONYSUS' LUST

Green bulbs glowing,
veiny networks, gingerly veiled in mist.
Cool bunches of round:
soft, smooth, wet.

I pluck; they jiggle in unison.
My tongue tastes the tight
skin as it rolls into my mouth.
My teeth close slowly until

a burst.
Sweet, wet wonder echoes through my mouth as juices flow.

NOCTURNE

The caldron of dreams serves us tastes
of nectar. Let us share these
appetites in the waking world, where
you lean your forehead into my shoulder.

DREAM PLACES

But in dreams my love
is undaunted. He does not turn

queries to quips. He awakens
to me in dream places, always skirting the edge

of this sky that he calls
reality. Places which are

pretty as roses without
people nearby.

INMOST LYRICS

When you come to me in the night
I will touch my lips to your shoulders;
I will hold you so,
a revelling cloud before thunder.

I know I can say nothing
to show you this burgeoning love.
It draws me up
beyond the telephone wires.

I know I can say nothing
on a morning after such dreams,
so singing inside,
I will take to the sky of this season.

I will take to the sweeping whiteness,
timeless, sunless and ashen--
this wordless sky,
pallid, pearly, and real.

UNANCHORED

I lost touch after I got into the ambulance. The street rocked--the stretcher was surprisingly unanchored. The street receded. The man told me to stop crying: I cried more. It wasn't the pain, but the reality, and my son stranded, not taken care of, and the realizing that life would be hard for a while. I watched the people cut off my boot, eighty dollars sliced through, the marvelous brown leather, my favorite barrier between me and the rain, the rain that came today and left me walking wounded in wet shoes, two holes in my foot and the memory of some woman at this intersection, right here, gripping me by the shoulders and yelling.

SONG

Steeped in deep dusk,
humid country of warm nights,
the stars spatter and fill me with their open, sweet sky.

Across black highways, through mountains of pines
past rhododendrons heaped on hills,
I hear you.

And now it is lovely, standing in a dark chorus of crickets.
Bats angle off in mid-air
as trees leaf to the warm.

PEARLS

Pearls
are true pleasure,
culled
out of the shell,
muscled together by quivering
flesh layered
around a wound,
are perfect scars of radiance--
would that I could do that with these wounds.

BEING INVISIBLE

Without hands
I awaken to sounds
without words.

Above the tree branches,
sky pales
toward evening.

Waking into dreams
at dusk,
there is only earth

and sky
and birds.
Birds!

BOUNDARIES

Days
I glide
along boundaries.
Outside is a mystery
of movements.

I am the only
golden swimmer.
I float up
and down
pecking pebbles.

Bubbles roll
alongside
the boundaries.
My tendrils blow
in windy water.

Nights
I dream
in darkness.
I drift
where boundaries don't go.

A SPIKY LEAF

Caught
in a stagnant puddle,
a spiky leaf
rests on the brick sidewalk,
allowing furry
underwater crud to coat
its surface. It lies still
under a smooth sheet of water
and forgets trees or wind.

FOG

Out in a field,
cows stand still in fog,
lost, and set in their losses.

If I stand still long enough,
silence holds me
rooted in grass.

POEM IN LOVE WITH HERSELF

Poetry happening when she is walking,
leaves in soft light rocking; the day turns toward her
and she listens to her steps.

Her black silk coat opens to her red dress of roses.
Inside, her warm heart loves me! I am
dreaming of her, our vigils in stillness.

We are tired but tender in evenings she has awaited.
She delights in my smiles, gladdens in the language of my
eyes,
finds more for me

hidden in pockets and folds of her skirts, always
more than I had conceived, growing rampant,
other times tenderly embracing with tendrils, green.

The windows expose tall trees: autumn moves again
with her in my heart. She is gracious to me.
Poetry happening when she is walking.

AT THE NIGHSITTER'S

AT THE NIGHTSITTER'S

Dark and wind invaded,
and we three waited in nightness
but for the one
yellow lamp.

The adult talked on,
his voice low, easing
the ululating air that moved outside
like a gusty viola.

Waiting for the skeleton key
to clamber in the door,
waiting to glimpse in the porch light,
Mother, come from the night.

MORE DETAILS

During my parents divorce
in the holy city
of Memphis, Uncle Ken fed pigeons
as they lit on his hand.

In the hotel,
Uncle Max's wingtips crossed
themselves: his suit had aged him
beyond teenager. He called me
"wiggle worm." I sat
impatient on the polished
wooden chair.

I had never seen a radiator spouting steam,
had never seen my Grandpa
smoke so solemnly
as this.
His five sons conspire,

my uncles.

WITHOUT WORDS

Someone told me I needed this blindness,
back then, without words, deep in my mother's sighs,
in her tender, tired ache.

Children as we are,
she and I look at each other. Our legacy
of loving too much builds.

Mothers alone learn to hold their own hands.
Human in the days of childhood, tugging instinctively,
I awoke with wonder

at how huge the pines we planted grew
and how old becomes
what new I am.

FOR ZAC

The round peg is certain
in your fingers.
It is tangible, smooth, orange.
You make the peg fit in.

Riding to work, to play,
day in, day out,
through rain and mud you watch the world move
in a series of winter twigs past the car window.

Today is Saturday. Tomato soup with grilled cheese
makes the warmth surround
the long, polished table.
Cabinets open and close.

The dishes bump up there in the sink.
Time is absent from the day, from the world.
Now you're back again, and the round peg is certain
in your fingers.

MOTHERING THE FEVER

You turn over, shiver in fevered heat
of steady one hundred and two degrees
fahrenheit, a height that takes me deep inside the night,
removes a day completely from my use,
as from room to room I move to find you
comforts--a book, a towel, water, or
later a matchbox car for afternoon.
Night comes back--I am still mothering
your fever. Hands move in blankets of chills.
When dark lifts its heavy heat,
the sunrise comes, reminder to us both
that this will pass, that fevers roll around
and over like the heat of that close star
that wakens us to wellness once again.

COOLING

I die among the ironing and live again
behind some clothesline where
the full-blown, damp sheets wrap me.

I once had proof that you were looking at me
and not at my hands, handing
all I had to you. My heart

now spent, I lean out for slow trees before rain, showing
their silvery undersides in the wind,
wrestling.

MEN LIKE HIM

think I am gullible, that my voice so small, my body so slight, means that I am easily teased. And for the most part, they are right. Men like him always react like that, embarrass me and say things like that, whatever they say, I blush to fulfill their expectations, in spite of all the training I do in the shower every morning--"I will not react to it. I will not hide behind my hair. I will not come across like a mouse today." Men always think I am gullible. Men like him.

KNOCKERS

The breasts of the St. Pauli's Girl
confront me, surging out behind mugs of beer.
I stand in his room and know that he doesn't find that

in me, or rather, on me. To compete with such airbrushed
women, I would have to undergo painful rearrangements.
I would have to sacrifice myself to the unhappy world

which opens its doors first to the women with knockers, and
I would never know if my mind were the true reason
I had gained entrance.

HE SAID

"Your body is like a work of art," and he sculpted me with his hands and moved alongside the window to find a new perspective.

Standing before my mirror with all the lights turned on, I decide I am abstract.

REMEMBERING MATT WACHSMAN

We sat on the private beach
watching the old people, swearing
we would never succumb to
gabardine and blue hair. It is
all solved with money in
your mind. The penny whistle
echoes back from the cliff,
the shallow, flat creek
turns a bend.

PSALM TO THE DAISIES

Daisies are abundant as sunlight:
nothing about them sings of darkness.
Their halos catch the attentions of tedious bumble bees.

Frugal as watchtowers, daisies leap up singularly,
standing all day, holding up, tilting
amidst the heads of one another.

Daisies sculpt the still air into circles,
and their blossoms teach lowly violets of light,
for daisies do not fold in upon themselves in darkness.

Daisies shoot up as tall as all the grasses,
radiating unabashed urges to rise
and praise the fiery sun.

BLESSING THE FOUR-O'CLOCKS

Evenings and lushness
open them out of tight buds--
trumpeteers, yellow and pink mix together
like happiness, blend together
in blossoms. Pistils and stamens lick out at the bees.
Four-o'clocks, I found you once,
blooming at four a.m.,
and true to your hour,
you sent your fragrance
into uninhabited air.

GLADS

I bought gladiolus to see you smile,
clumped bunches of pink
fanning out in their jar.

When you embraced me, shadows and pain scattered
briefly. Your voice displaced fears--
night bloomed incessantly.

Still the past resounds
blackly with wraiths
of dissolved assurances.

Tonight the old man revving his truck engine will not allow
a lucid evening. Restless in twilight,
the road could take me wherever I wanted,

but I keep my son's vigil as he sleeps
and the dark road is useless. No attentive night
is waiting for me to find proportion.

If I could find beauty in some moment,
it would arise from these blossoms, but they do not know me
or twist their ruffled ears to hear these prayers.

THE SENT FLOWER

stinks like a beauty-pageant wrist corsage,
reeks of courtesy,
asks for something in being sent.
How can it be a flower any more?
It is so unlike the crab apple blossoms and buttercups
stolen from a neighbor's yard.

How those stolen died so lushly,
having lived in shallow dusks of humid country grass,
blossoming with their mutations.

But this hot-house hybrid was forced from dirt,
dreaming ruffled breasts of prom girls.
It will turn stale brown in the sighing refrigerator,
pierced through by its pearl-tipped needle,
smothered
under sharp cellophane.

AUTUMNAL

I am dizzy in the circling of this passion,
passion of evenings, going along with the night,
swilling like the dark wine from your bag--
sharp and pungent.

A faint breeze shudders the silence.
The thought of tonight with you balances evenly,
and evening turns toward my face.
The sky is flecked with birds,

all flying from here, reasonless,
all flocking away from the murmuring hush.
How can they move from this season?
How can they move from this strong, deep dusk?

WALTZ OF THE URCHINS

WALTZ OF THE URCHINS

Let us go waltz in grasses,
dreaming of sleep in lulls
of afternoons. Let us

go escape at dusk,
after rainstorms, out under
overpasses, wild roses

bloom. Let us explore
broken old houses, stand
on the porch that sags, yet holds fast.

We waltz in dew. The single white
gardenia fills my kitchen
with havens of heavy drunkenness.

INVENTION

The old melody mingled with itself--
two-part invention, rather like a round.
In my thoughts it skipped like a sly wood-elf,
my mind a dream of what was once a sound
I could play. Piano before me now
my fingers delve deep in that memory.
They follow their own will, and I allow
them to lead through the fog, where I can't see.
both hands play staccato where one should slur.
Fingers linger too long on tiring trills.
The elves giggle as all becomes a blur
and dance blithely away across the hills.

A whirling dervish in F quickly wound
away from the way J.S. made it sound.

METROPOSSUM

Her silver fur glints moonlight. Strange
pink feet cross Arthur Street.
False spring in winter lured her out:
frost hastens her retreat.

Dark hours take their time tonight.
Late creatures become bold.
Her wormy tail trails eerily as
she passes through the cold.

Nocturnal eyes find mine as I
emerge from cellar steps.
I smirk at her predicament,
or is it she who jests?

Here I am out washing clothes
this wet, dark two a.m.,
but hungry opossums venture out
on more than my odd whim.

I could make things simpler if
my belly had a sack,
or if I took my family
out riding on my back.

THE LITANY OF THE LIZARD

Praise brooks with pebbles in bright sun.
Praise crevices just so wide.
Praise softest, sweetest, loosest dirt.
Praise bugs that tickle my insides.

Praise rough red brick walls rising high.
Praise grasses so long, swaying in breeze.
Praise greeny beetles creeping slowly.
Praise aunts and worms--never mind bees.

Praise dust and air and dank, warm puddles.
Praise the high noons of May.
Praise the bowing limbs of mimosas.
Praise concrete, hot and gray.

Praise gnarly bark and quivering leaves.
Praise open, bright blue skies.
Praise smallness, brightness, and with mercy
may the sun forever rise.

SONATA

Your kisses--like forsythias--bloomed in bleak
wet January (sweet surprises), touched
my eyelids, opened them from old dark dreams.
Again I seek those yellow stars in such
a season when the hard cold finds its way
inside me as the winter presses in.
It seems that when I've finished one thing more,
I turn to find I must begin again.
But when I draw close to your chest, your heart
beats strongly. Soon small blossoms reappear.
Your gray eyes open wider into mine.
I feel warm solace when I am this near
a man who weighs his words and takes his time
and counts it as a blessing to be mine.

KING OF GRASSES

In dense fields, swaying to and fro,
herds of dandelions grow

golden manes in jungle grasses,
where they reign while springtime passes.

Those hollow milky stems hold straight
and tall bright yellow tufts, whose weight

cannot break; it only bends
the strong stalks in sweeping winds.

And in late summer lawns shall bear
the aging ruler's silver hair.

We'll idly kick the puffs askew,
or blow them to make wishes true.

ROBERTA IN THE GARDEN

When Roberta sings out in the garden
her voice comes back from the ridge,
and the plants lift up their tendrils.
Yea! the plants lift up their tendrils!

Roberta sings with her mouth wide open.
She sings praise to the cabbage.
The gourds grow round and bountiful.
Oh, those gourds, round and bountiful!

Late afternoon, and she finds what's ripened--
sweet tomatoes and borage,
and a handful of daffodils.
A handful of daffodils!

In the half-light Roberta is laden
with all that she can manage,
so she scales the steep homeward hill.
Done, she climbs the steep homeward hill!

PAULA

Paula is a poet and Paula is brimming.
Paula is a giggle toppling with wine.
Paula is an essence of moonlight's silver yellow.
Paula is a dance of runcible spoons.
Paula is replacing darkness with laughter.
Paula is moving forward on sidewalks with rhythm.
Paula is rising on the moonlit lake.
Paula is shifting the tides with her moods.
Paula is wading in the most shallow early hours.
Paula is awakening, glowing in the late evening.
Paula is a leisure afternoon's comfort.
Paula is a symphony of galloping youth.

FRESH

He stands by the wheelbarrow full of sweet potatoes.
"Big as your arm," he says, turning
tubers over in their dust and soft clods.

Fuzzy root hairs hang down from them--fresh, ripe,
snapping with harsh orange in brown dirt skins.
He scrubs them down, sloughs off warm mud,

gnarled fingers knuckling in the knots of his work
as he dreams the steaming baked potatoes
mashed across the butter, yellow running

with some of the white corn and those beefsteak
tomatoes: wavering rinds, sliced-through sleeves.
The smile wrinkles as his shirt billows soft.

LIMBO

If time is all you need, then use it well.
Love can last through seasons, years or ages.
It will gain more strength, ruminate, and swell,
freezing fast while winter's ice-wind rages.
In mud the metamorphoses of spring
bear frogs, strange newts, and wingéd parasites.
In seething swarms, my love for you will bring
hatchings of such relentless appetites.
It will grow more through summer's dismal glare,
like rampant weeds and great thick tufts of grass:
and still, as autumn turns tired and bare,
my love for you will seed itself and last.
Yet on your word depend the very seasons.
Wordless, my love waits with all these reasons.

GROUNDS FOR DIVORCE

I did not intend, when reading sonnets
after loving, to be taken lightly.
Your only voice that resounded empty
in response did not want to hear Shakespeare
from me, praising atypical beauty.
I saw in your plain straight brown hair, "nothing
like the sun," and quiet air resounded.
I read it well, and it only mattered
less. Poetry is not for those who forget
intent, who never see the rapture glow
in the eyes of one reading aloud, alone.

Not for those who forget, my poem to you
fell on deaf ears, stopped at a closed heart.

FEAR OF FALLING

There is this thing, this usual thing I've seen:
a man unsure, a woman still waiting.

Or the other way around sometimes. But still
I watch some days, behind your tiredness.

You're careful, as you look at me
to never look too long for fear of falling.

If it's true, if you do "love to fall,"
to suspend your body out over steep cliffs,

to rappel, sliding swiftly down your rope,
you do with your body first, later you heart.

It's the main thing you want to prove,
no matter how sensitive you come across,

that thing requiring brawn before heart.
That thing which loves to fall won't fall to love.

LARGO

The red tailed hawk passes over the lake again.
Five crows range the open sky. Their caws
graze the charged air. I look out
above lingering water where clouds are high,
where the sky offers the hawk and easy escape.

His drifting drives the crows through shrilling wind.
His integrity endures, immune to squawks.
I imagine, down on this sloping ground,
it may be more than my hopeful, quiet lie,
that your slow-moving love takes careful shape.

Five crows pass, relentless with intent.
They follow their own glinting, dark-winged laws.
The hawk coasts, impervious, and slow,
floating on his serene, even time.
The hawk,
and you,
and this slow-moving lake.

PORTRAIT

Miss Elsie knew such problems late in life.
She couldn't quite remember where she kept
the peppermint for tea, or chamomile

to calm her nerves. She'd clatter amidst all
the canisters of spices, herbs and flour,
spilling oregano and whispering

about tree branches scratching window panes
or how her father's oboe practice made
her dream of large animals performing stunts.

She thought back to the holidays in Kent,
the barren, windy beaches, the shore
sublime. White crashing waves would then uproot

her crazed, distressed intensity for things.
Sea poppies sprawled on rocks. Wind-driven sand
stung her eyes, took her voice, her breath.

WATER WIND

The swelling, echoing sea is a breeze of blue green sleep.
Memories brim below the waves and fly under the deep.
Swirls of sand storm in water wind,
and I remember once again,
fondly, fiercely
I strayed.

VITA

Rose Elaine Becallo was born in Huntsville, Alabama, on June 8, 1965. She grew up in Waynesboro, Tennessee, and received the Leadership Scholarship to Oberlin College of Arts and Sciences, where she attended one year. In May 1990 she graduated Phi Beta Kappa from The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, where she was also awarded the Working Students Assistance Scholarship.

As a Graduate Assistant and Teaching Associate at UTK, she worked as a tutor and taught freshman composition. She was also Teaching Assistant to Professor Joyce Carol Thomas in 1990-91. She won the graduate award for poetry in 1991 and the graduate award for fiction in 1992. Her poetry has appeared in campus publications, some of which are listed in the Acknowledgements. She attended the National Conference on Myth and Fantasy in October 1991 and read her paper entitled "Sir Orfeo and the Poet's Fantasy of the Power of Speech: The Unconscious as Revealed in the Court of the Fairy King."

She is the mother of a five-year-old son, Zachary Nicholson. She and her son reside in Knoxville, Tennessee.