To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Elizabeth Kate Derting entitled "Waking Muses." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Arthur Smith, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

Accepted for the Council:

Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of The Graduate School

Waking Muses

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Elizabeth Kate Derting

August 1997

Acknowledgments

The following poems appeared in

Acorn Whistle: Log Cabin, Early Autumn; Fall 1995.

American Collegiate Poets' Anthology: Grass Dance; Fall 1994.

Phoenix: Phone Call from Philadelphia; Spring 1995.

The poem, "Left to My Own Desires, Saying Goodbye Would Be Impossible," won the University of Tennessee, Department of English Graduate Prize in Poetry for 1997.

I would like to thank Dr. Arthur Smith, Dr. Marilyn Kallet, and Dr. Rob Stillman, who served as my committee members. Their support, encouragement, and patience helped me to complete this project. They have been role models for me as a writer, but more importantly, they have been mentors. Through their instruction as teachers, their friendship, and their guidance, I discovered new ways of thinking about the world and new ways to write about and express my experiences in the world.

Thanks to Kim Hedrick for her friendship and her endless patience in listening to early drafts and offering editing suggestions. I would also like to thank the West Knoxville Rotary Club for sponsoring my year abroad as a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholar and for the opportunities to explore the world which I would not have had without their support.

Abstract

The poems in this collection were written over the last three years, which has been a time of discovery, a delving into my own sense of self and a reaching out to find my place in the world. The poems reflect that process of discovery. In some way, each of them calls upon a memory, a dream, or a voice from my life and challenges me to examine why that particular moment, place, or person is important to me. The poems in the first section take a specific vision or memory and search for its significance. The section comes from voice and identity. The poems deal with recognizing others' voices and making connections with their voices, as well as with the speaker's own voice. Discovery is the last issue addressed in the poems of the third section. These poems explore the notion of discovering the world and the speaker's sense of self in that world. This semi-autobiographical collection of poems traces the process of a poet exploring the world and her place in it, tries to find the significance of those experiences, and then tells her story for others.

Table of Contents

Section	Page
Introduction	1
I. Visions	4
Dreaming Dylan Thomas from my bed in Swansea	5
A Note on Dreaming Dylan Thomas	6
A Path to Follow	7
Rain in Baltimore	8
In This Weather	9
In This Weather	10
Prelude	11
Log Cabin, Early Autumn	12
Seeds for the Heart	13
Up from the Wilderness	14
Legacies	15
At the Age of Eighty and Still Farming	17
He Sold Eggs for His Money	18
The Last of the Bachelor Brothers to Die	19
II. Voices	20
Grass Roots	21
Not Knowing	22
Europa	23
Grass Dance	24
Phone Call from Philadelphia	25
Bessie's Blues	26

What I Would Say 27

A Song of Good-bye 28

Crush on a Poet 29

Breath and Voice 30

Why Poets Sojourn 31

A Note on Why Poets Sojourn 32

III. Discoveries 33

Waking Muses 34

Helios Rising 35

Mosaics 37

All Lines are Intangible on a Map 38

Honeysuckle Vines Along the Roadside 39

Map Legend 40

Treasure 41

Driving Through the End of a Rainbow 42

These Small Rituals 43

Wisdom Tooth 44

Taking Off the Life Jacket 45

Left to My Own Desires, Saying Goodbye Would Be Impossible 46

Vita 47

Introduction

Forensic anthropology is the study of death and its many processes and effects. In the spring of my senior year of undergraduate studies, I took a forensic anthropology class with Dr. William Bass and learned about living. As the human body decays, it leaves signs, symbols that tell its story. Forensic anthropologists seek out those symbols and through their discoveries, they give a voice to the dead and tell their stories to the living.

For weeks I looked at slides illustrating these silent symbols and grew accustomed to the sight of death. I had seen movies like *Dead Poets Society* and thought I knew all about carpe diem. I thought I understood what it meant to live. When I entered the woods on a secluded hill behind the University of Tennessee hospital, I discovered, first hand, the fragility of the human condition. Bodies, in various stages of decomposition, scattered the hillside; some of them were skeletons, brittle bones beyond recognition as a once-living person; others were fleshy and corpulent, all too recognizable for me to examine them with scientific detachment. I looked at the bodies, knew what processes would occur over the next months or years and realized that I had not yet discovered the process of living. Not just existing or following a constructed plan for school, career, or life goals, but discovering what living was to me. What it meant to explore the world and my place within it, in a spiritual sense.

Over the last few weeks I have been collecting my poems and thinking about what to write for this introduction, and I discovered patterns and connections in my poetry of which I had not been aware. The poetry in this collection was written over the last three years, years full of opportunities for discovering what living is to me. These last three years have been a journey for me, a delving into my own sense of self and a reaching out to find my place in the world. The poems reflect that process of discovery. In some way, each of them calls upon a memory, a dream, or a voice from my life and challenges me to

examine why that particular moment, place, or person is important to me. As I read these poems again, many of them for the first time in weeks or months, I realized that many muses have been present in my life, and writing poetry has been a way of awakening those muses. I entitled this collection *Waking Muses* because it expresses what I see as the process of writing and the process of living.

When I begin writing, I usually hear a line or a phrase first. I take that line and allow myself to write freely, to let the words come as they will, and to let the rhythm carry me to a discovery hidden within the language. Some times, a poem begins with a vision or a memory. I carry that image in my mind for a few days, allowing my imagination to wander around within it. Writing, for me, is an organic process. It is a journey, an exploration led by language and rhythm. A discovery made in one poem reveals another path to follow, another journey to begin. Studying the poetry of others and writing poetry of my own has opened the world to me. The process of writing influences the way I experience the world. People and places become potential muses. Writing poetry has made me more aware of the significance others can have in one's life, even if they are only in one's life for a brief moment, and I have discovered that experiencing life in terms of the moment and of the significance of moments, people, or places makes me more aware of the muses in my own life. The last three years of writing have been a process of awakening those muses.

The inspirations for these poems come from many sources. It may be a vision, a dream image, or a memory. The poems in the first section take a specific vision or memory and search for its significance. Often, as in the poems "In This Weather," the speaker recalls a memory and then searches for why that memory has resurfaced, why that memory is significant to the speaker's present life. Other poems, like "Dreaming Dylan Thomas," take dreams and search for the issues behind the dream. Another source of inspiration for the poems comes from voice and identity. Voice, in this sense, refers to

one's voice in the world or to the message the speaker hears in another person's voice or life. The poems in the second section deal with recognizing others' voices and making connections with those voices. One example of this is the poem, "Phone Call from Philadelphia." In this series of poems, the speaker also discovers her own voice, as in the poem "Why Poets Sojourn." The last source of inspiration addressed in this collection is discovery, the notion of exploring the world and of the speaker discovering what is important to her in life. It is about breaking some ties in the world, as in "Treasure," while discovering more about oneself. These poems also make new connections between the speaker and others, as in "Left to My Own Desires, Saying Goodbye Would Be Impossible." This semi-autobiographical collection of poems traces the process of a poet exploring the world and her place in it, tries to find the significance of those experiences, and then tells her story for others.

I have realized, after compiling this collection and trying to find patterns in the poems, that the process of writing parallels the discovery of what it means to live. Writing, like living, is an on-going journey. It is exploring the world, reaching out to others, and then looking within oneself to discover the significance of those experiences. Just as the forensic anthropologist interprets the symbols which tell the stories of the dead, the writer searches for symbols which reveal and give voice to the stories of human experience.

I. Visions

Dreaming Dylan Thomas from my bed in Swansea

He came to me in a dream two nights after I visited his home,
a boathouse along the cliffs of the estuary at Laugharne.
I met him on the same jarring bus which took me from Swansea
to Llanelli and Carmarthen, over the Welsh hills, green and
made patchwork by the bramble hedges dividing plots of farmland
where sheep grazed and where late blackberries hung ripe for picking.
He wore wrinkled cordorouys which scratched with each movement
and a ragged sweater clinging every swell of his great belly.
Sunlight poured through the rain clouds, coming in both sides of the bus,
blurring details of his face in brilliant light. I saw his face only once.
I recognized him by the sadness of his eyes, the way I had seen them
in old black and white photos hung throughout Swansea.
He walked me through his life, to the pub he patronized. When
I looked into the bar mirror, his reflection stared back at me.
I woke then, in a strange bed, the walls closing around me,
the sea beating in a mist outside the window. I did not know where I was
until I woke from that dream and discovered I lay in my own bed in Swansea,
the moonlight peering in my window like a peeping tom.
I still felt frightened from the crashing of the sea into
the room I recalled, from two days before, as his room.
For a moment I knew what it must have been like to be him,
the smallness of his world closing in around him,
trapped between a rocky cliff and the pounding sea.

A Note on "Dreaming Dylan Thomas"

Dreams haunt me, and some times I do not know if my memories are real or if they are dreams. I used to dream about people I have never met, but whom I recognize from photos or stories. My father's father, who died long before I was born. He came to me in a dream when I was about eight years old, and I recognized him because he looked exactly like the faded photos my grandmother hung on her walls. I dreamed of John F. Kennedy. He came to me, offering directions, a path I could follow, when my own life's journey had taken a strange detour. Last year, in Swansea, Wales, I dreamed of Dylan Thomas. I knew him by his eyes, haunted and irrepressible.

His eyes follow me, as I walk his life in my dreams. I stumble through the silent streets of Laugharne, a ghost town, the streets empty except for a rainbow shadowing the streaked sunlight. His eyes, the only living thing, dance on the horizon. I enter Brown's Hotel, his favorite pub. The patrons stare at me, aware now of him, of me, and they watch his hands reach for a glass among the clean and dirty. I am aware now, that his hands are my hands, that I am the one reaching for something to quench the thirst in my brain. I discover the world through his eyes.

I wake suddenly, shivering in a strange bed, the walls closing around me, the sea beating in a mist outside my window. The world I have discovered rocks violently, tossed between the rocky cliffs and the pounding sea. Moonlight pours in the window, illuminating the waves, and silencing the fury of the storm. The sudden silence wakes me again, pitches me back into reality, but I do not know where I am, disoriented and sweating, until I realize I am in my own bed in Swansea, with the moonlight peering in my window like a peeping tom.

A Path to Follow

Fort Sanders dwindles behind Sherilyn and me.
Green uncut summer shines before us and
the farm-winding road leads home. I know
these hidden by-ways. This time I walk them
in a dream, but they are not true to life.

Each step softens the black top road,
unearths sedimentary trails I've walked
in Cades Cove. At the bottom of the
up-and-down curve the leafy archway clears,
white houses and rural mailboxes dotting the hills.

Children peek-a-boo toward us, laughing.
They know the way home.
Then we are lost, somewhere
in the hills between a home I left
and one I now seek. The trails wind south
and east, the sky opens, land clears.
We can get help in the farm house
with the gravel path and friendly porch.

In the face filled kitchen
young students familiar but unknown
say nothing, offer me bread and wine.
I know I am welcome here.
I explore the hearty wooden kitchen
and wait for the host.

John F. Kennedy strolls into the room, casual
in khakis and a cardigan, looking handsome
the way he looked before Bay of Pigs
and Birmingham marked his face.
He leads me to the table, he at the head
I to his right, talking literature, politics, Robert.
I look into his eyes, tell him
I admired his brother, wish I had known him.
He recalls memories and
Robert reflects in the light of his face
like an old home movie.

He leaves the room and I follow him
to a hilly graveside at Arlington.
Alone, he mourns by his brother's grave,
looks at me regretfully and questioning.
Sorrow hovers over the grave
thick as the clouds hanging above us.

Rain in Baltimore

Streets, rain-soaked
echo laughter. Night
rolls like fog
blown across lights.

Hands clasp and
search for glowing
hush of dinner,
company against

moonless rains.
Starlight, lingering
briskly in winds
whips around corners

hustles the click
and trample of
feet on brick.

In This Weather

Rain blows under
my straining umbrella,
pelts my skin, makes me
remember mushroom-capped
umbrellas I carried,
thick plastic in kindergarten colors.
In my five-year-old days,
tossing whirly bird seeds,
watching them helicopter to the ground.
Smiley faces rewarded
good behavior and
a glittered trace of my hand
hung on my door at home.
Under my black umbrella
I rush home, avoid
puddles I would have tromped once,
no purpose except
the satisfying
splash
of my double-knotted shoes.

In This Weather

The sheep-rustling wind blew November rain.
I walked three blocks, soaked. The umbrella no good
in this weather like nothing we have in Tennessee.
The rain did not bother me as much as
my voice bouncing unanswered
in the rooms of tile and stone.

I steeped a cup of tea, the scent of ginger rising
in the steam reminded me of pumpkin pie,
of the pilgrims surviving
weather like nothing they knew at home.
Praying and singing around their firelit
tables in their homes could not have warmed them.
I sipped my tea and leaned against the radiator. And

without a soul to hear me, I sang loudly, my voice
resonant in the empty rooms,
wrapping around the stones, warming them.

Prelude

Early morning, autumn, in the heart of Virginia,
light falls crisp, makes trees, houses and
cows on the hills look more than real --
more than the artist's stroke on fresh canvas.
This is the last cry of the dying,
a cry for all who lose something green.
Though the vivid colors of the leaves
invite my eye, if I were close enough,
my touch would destroy them,
crumble them into a thousand pieces.
With a little distance, their plush colors
camouflage their frailty

Log Cabin, Early Autumn

From the crack of the paned windows,
breathlessly cool as first hands holding,
air slips in. Outside:
a cricket chirps. And a tree

like a shadow where the moon
shines too high to show true
the rugged limbs, the leaves
hang in one clasp of bark and vein. I

think of me near you, eyes closed
tight, fingers supple, breath warm,
the blanket soft near my face. Fall

takes me back.

Seeds for the Heart

Inside a grove of cherry trees, the pink canopy of blossoms casts a warm glow
on our entwined arms, and wind shakes the blossoms until their petals
fall in a breathless hush. I know as you pull me close, your hands
against the small of my back, that later, when the barren limbs tremble,
and the air hangs thick and cool, my thoughts will return to this moment.
So I am keeping the petals you gathered for me in water, to make them last
as long as possible. In a few weeks, the blooms will be gone from the trees,
replaced by growing limbs and green leaves. I do not know if our love
will continue to grow after the blooms of this season disappear.
Love is not as predictable as nature. But these blossoms remind me
that all things begin as tiny seeds, some times planted and nurtured, protected
from the elements, some times blown with the wind, surviving on strength.

Up from the Wilderness

for Cynthia Page 1972-1995

It's been almost a year since your death and even longer
since we climbed the hidden trail in the Chimneys,
reached a clearing you showed me how to find.
We ate peanut-butter and honey sandwiches
packed on impulse, sat on a rocky bald where
the soil was too acidic for anything to grow.
The waxy rhododendrons surrounding us
had not begun to bloom. It was not their time.
Someday I hoped to see them.

I went back there but could not find the path where
the summit reaches the stars from a bed of leaves and water.
I was not here last year to say goodbye and
in the leafy silence I whispered it among a curtain
of mountain petals, violet-pink brilliant
against the fog hazed summer morning
and more beautiful than I expected.

Legacies

It is the gaps in my memories of them that interest me, the process of reconciling the imaginings of an eight-year-old with the realities of who they were. I must have heard more of their stories than I thought, for I recognize glimpses of them in myself.

I was about eight years old when I knew my great uncles. Though they were always nice to me, I always feared them. They belonged to a world I could not envision or understand. I never knew why none of them married. I also knew, from family stories, that they hid their money somewhere in the house, too tight-fisted with it to make their lives more bearable. But I also discovered that they had many stories to tell. I remembered only glimpses of them, recalled only parts of their stories.

The last three of the Derting brothers sat on the front porch of their farm house for most of the day on Sundays. Though they did not go to church, they would not blaspheme a Sunday by doing any work that wasn't necessary. Their family had lived there for four generations, and they farmed a meager existence. The other brothers and sisters had passed on or moved away, never to be seen again. All three of them were in their eighties, but every one in Hiltons, Virginia, still called them boys. None of them had ever married, and in the eyes of the town, they were still the hollering young men who whistled and stomped bluegrass at the Carter family fold in the old days. Sunday afternoons, they gathered on the front porch, overlooking the railroad tracks and the two lane road to Bristol.

Cain, the oldest one, claimed a wooden rocker and weaved stories from it. His blue, cataracted eyes widened as he told about riding to Bristol in a buggy on a dirt road, long before anyone in Hiltons could afford a Model-T. He wore faded overalls with a big front pocket where he always carried sunflower seeds. He shaved once a week, so most of the time, he had a prickly white beard which matched the crop of white hair escaping from

his faded hat. He laughed quietly and fumbled with an old pocket watch.

Ernest, the quiet one, leaned his straight, caned-back chair against the shingle siding of the house, planting both feet on the floor to balance his suspended weight. He wore muddy black boots laced to his shins, but left the laces undone when he sat on the porch. His jeans hung low on his hips, and their stiffness crackled when he walked. Ernest took care of the chickens every day, and he slipped away to feed them even when company came. Rough brown scabs covered his age-spotted hands from where the chickens fought his attempts to harvest the eggs. Even in his eighties, he sold their eggs for money.

Roscoe, the youngest of the brothers, moved smoothly on the porch swing, reclining on a old chair cushion. He tapped his foot steadily, and he could still play a mean harmonica. He had earned a reputation as a ladies' man in his twenties, carousing at Hiltons Market, when the bluegrass whined sweetly on Saturday nights. Family stories told that he loved and lost his one true love in that store, and because he never got over her, he remained a bachelor.

At the Age of Eighty and Still Farming

When I was eight I feared him.
Cain was the oldest of three great uncles
who remained bachelors all their lives. He fumbled
with his pocket watch, kept Sunday time
from a wooden rocker on the front porch.
His cataracted eyes widened like two
blue-frosted saucers when he told me
stories of horses and buggies clomping,
shuddering to Bristol on dirt roads
long before any one in Hiltons, Virginia
could afford one of them Model T's.
His white bearded smile revealed patchwork teeth
and his opaque eyes frightened me. He did not
belong in the present, he dredged ghosts
I could not envision or understand.
He called me to his side, reached into the front
pocket of his overalls, placed a handful
of sunflower seeds in my hands,
replaced their bag in the pocket closest to his heart.
I wanted to carry them in my pocket, too. To reach
inside, retrieve the seeds from which stories sprang.

He Sold Eggs for His Money

Hens ate corn from his hands and perched on his wrist.
He did not fear the flapping of wings
as they approached his body, he knew
what they were capable of doing.

Ernest tended the chickens every day
slipping away even when company came.
I followed him around the farm, amazed.
I feared the chickens, would not let them
eat from my hands, did not like the flash of
air near my face when they flew to the fence post.

I liked to sit near him on the porch,
felt kin to his quiet ways.
He leaned his straight, caned-back chair
against the shingle siding, planted both feet
to balance his weight. He wore muddy
black boots with laces to his shins,
left the laces undone, his shoes clomping,
his stiff knees crackling with each step.

In a family of talkers, he got things done,
spoke with a voice of reason among
a throng of Sunday storytellers.

The Last of the Bachelor Brothers to Die

Roscoe had the family eyes, like mine and my father's
black and faintly glowing when the light hit them right
like the coal he heaped out back of his house and
lit only during the coldest of times. He wasted away to
nothing after years of saving every penny
he ever scratched out of the dirt.

Stacks of Big Tony dog food lined his back porch.
He owned no dogs, just cats, and I imagined
he ate the dog food because the family always
talked about his tight-fisted grip on money.

One time I shared the swing with him, sank my
bony body into the blue-padded cushion,
my feet dangling inches above the floor,
the world far away and silent from his porch view.
I felt lonely for him, the last of his brothers
alone in the home they had shared, his life now
as empty as his pockets, all his riches heaped
together, hidden in the hollows of his house.

II. Voices

Grass Roots

"With Libby's on the label, you'll like it , like it, like it, on your table, table, table."

The polished, pressed wood creaks,
swaying on legs meant only to hold
holiday turkeys and such.
I couldn't do it on a table because I
could never eat on that table again,
eat the baby garden peas sold
by the commercial jingle that
followed me through life.

My mother wanted me to eat
those peas. I defied her,
the peas waxing cold, the aluminum
tasting more palpable, the butter greasy film.
My brother always ate his, though he
eats them fresh from the garden, raw.
I could never do that either, they taste
too much the way I think grass would.

I remember hulling peas with my mother
and neighbors, singing about a dog named "Bingo."
Mom watched, making sure we didn't
put them in our noses--my aunt did once.
It's funny to imagine her with peas in her
nose--I wonder, did they remind her of grass?

Mom and I no longer hull peas together.
She buys hers canned, now, too.
"Should we buy Libby's?" we laugh
in aisle three of White's, a couple of
school girls with a secret, but
we don't really share secrets, I don't
tell her everything. My label
reads less clear than the one on the peas.

I refrain from peas at dinner, no longer
forced to eat them. My mom
trusts me to make my own
choices, vegetable and otherwise.
She thinks I will choose the right
thing, doesn't suspect my wavering
thoughts on the future, my religion,
doesn't hear my voice growing into its own,
a pea pod bursting with life, seeds
ready to be plucked.

She can't imagine I might think of me
being served up on some one's creaking table
like the baby garden peas bearing my name,
fresh from the garden, still a little wild, like grass.

Not Knowing

She tells me she might be HIV-positive, she was tested a few days ago.
No one else knows, she fears what people will say, and
the thought of death wears treads of worry on her brow,
slumps her posture with the burden of thinking, not knowing.
When she tells me, my world stops.

AIDS lurks down the street, some blaring midday melodrama, not
on the face of my best friend, her face now marked with mortality,
the look Eve must have worn when purged from Eden.

I hold her sobbing body into my own chest and do not know what to say.
I remember childhood bruises and scrapes. "Don't worry,
everything will be okay," my mom always said, but
I cannot mock reality with barefoot bee-sting consolations.

We both know some times things are not okay.
We cry late into the night, neither of us twenty one yet,
fearing the uncertainty of a world we are still discovering.

Sitting By the Fountain of Europa and the Bull

You perch on his back, muscular
legs balanced with his bending stride.
The wind pushes back wavy hair
showing your face, serene in the shadows.
Arm curved, you dare to touch
the bull's amorous tongue as he bows
curves to meet your hand, bellowing, hissing.
In this art, you are the survivor,
goddess in green-streaked copper.

Grass Dance

The sun warms my skin, the
steady rhythm fires my blood, pumps
my pliable heart. A pow-wow.
Kaleidoscope of red, blue, yellow,
the dancers become the art.
They stamp buckskin-covered feet
left, right, left, twirl.
The yellow frenzy of feathers and beads resounds
jingle of tiny bells tied to ankles,
clink of rolled snuff can lids,
the swirling rainbow of weave work.
My leg muscles contract, wanting to join.
Free spirits, dance on.

Phone Call from Philadelphia

"I've spent too
much quality
time with myself
lately," she said.
Her voice
more weak than
I remember,
like someone who
might drink alone
in smoke-lit bars
not for the taste
only for the effect.
I know the sound
in her voice.
I've heard it
in my own
on nights alone
split from friends.
The great coupling
of our generation
has begun,
first acquaintances
now comrades
with whom
we once evaded
committments, rings
and white satin
pairing up and
off, playing
spin the bottle
this time
for keeps. I
guess we have
too much aim.
Our wayward bottles
never stop spinning
content in the thrill
of motion, still
creating the rules
of our game.

Bessie's Blues

Got eyes big as my
heart
  too big
Got me
livin' life
  unafraid of seein'
    what the heart
already knows
    Life doesn't
  get any easier
because you get older
    Life is hard
always will be
    So I'm livin'
this world
    my mojo heart
all eyes, hands
  reachin' with
trust 'cause
  faith
is all there is.

What I Would Say

This is a poem
  a song it took me
six years to learn
  to hear my heart
telling you good-bye

You always liked
  to hear me sing
a bluesy-twang
  in my voice
wailing words
  I could not say

I sent thoughts your way
  across rivers between us
listened for your voice
  in hill-and-valley music
Geography did not
  keep us apart

I gave my love
  in some one else's words
I'm giving you
  good-bye in mine
though I don't know
  if you hear them
if you ever heard them

A Song of Good-bye

for Cynthia Page 1972-1995

In life you could not
play the guitar
but in my dreams, Cynthia
you came to me singing
I watched your fingers
strumming chords
I have not learned to play

His words meant
something to me
Oh your love
meant something to me
Love is too much
words to find
Love is
too much heart to find

You gave me good-bye
in dreams and song
I have not
dreamed you since then
though I hear your words
when I am
reminded of you.

Crush on a Poet

My breath stops
        starts and quivers
with each syllable, smooth
movement line to line
        steady rhythmic break
        breath and voice
echoes across the room.
        He leans into the art,
performance, stream of words
spilling
        from him to me.
        He wraps his lips
around every delicious syllable,
savoring each one
        like tender plums
fresh from the tree,
caressing each sound
with his tongue.
        "Metaphysical poetry
        makes women swoon,"
he says.
        I think I know why.

Breath and Voice

On visiting John Keats's house in Hampstead, London, October 14, 1995:

A quiet presence shadowed every room, as if a long silent voice whispered moments lost to the mute walls and lingered in the light straining through the paned windows. My own breath hung, crystals in the autumn air. I had been sick with a cough, catarrh, as the Brits called it, and my coughing echoed eerily through the hall and into his bedroom. I shuddered, imagined the echoes of Keats's first fevered coughs when he discovered he had contracted consumption, knew his breath, the life and fire of a poet, would wane until only his words remained. My breath and voice hushed, bound to his spirit, his home.

At Dylan Thomas's boathouse, Laugharne, Wales, October 20, 1995:

On tip-toe I peered into his writing shed, my breath frosty on the cool window pane. It was like glimpsing into a corner of his mind, ideas and words scattered on crumpled papers on the floor, as if awaiting his return. Photos of writers hung over his desk, Whitman's scraggly face, D.H. Lawrence's quiet stare. Nothing was quiet and sad here like at Keats's house. Music and voices sounded from everywhere, the ruffle of rain-soaked feathers, the cawing of sea gulls, dogs barking across the valley. He heard nature's symphony and spilled it into words.

At Stratford-upon-Avon, November 3, 1995:

White swans floated, ghostly, on the star-sprinkled water of the river. The first frosty night of the fall. I walked by the water's edge and crossed the foot bridge, awed by the river lights, the reflections of church steeples, street lamps, and the Swan Theater. My cheeks stung, and my hands numbed, despite gloves, hat, and coat. I exhaled, my breath tangible in the coldness, my wonder audible as I sighed at the beauty of the night.

Why Poets Sojourn

I went south for Sorrento and found the sun setting gold on the waters crashing below me. My breath mingled on the wave of Mediterranean air moving east. I wondered if such pleasure was lost on those who lived with it every day, like lovers who forget why they loved. An old man passed me along the curve of the path. He paused, took in the view, and mumbled "Ahhh." I caught the night train back to Naples, felt it barrelling to the rhythm of the moon. The moments rippled through my body, pounded my heart, like a constant strobe to the conversation I shared with an American flutist I met that afternoon. I found myself telling him Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata made me cry. "Beethoven must have been a great lover," he turned to me and said. "To have that kind of power and restraint, to know just when to let go, explode from within, and exhale all the chaos from his mind and body." I wanted to throw my head back, release a song so tremulous the pines would bristle, and for a moment, the moon would tip her light to my face.

A Note on "Why Poets Sojourn"

No matter how many times I listen to Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata, I hear something different in the somber bass pounding steadily over the melody of longing. The tears come, for no reason, except from desire to exhale the heaviness I sometimes feel in my heart when the world stops outside my own thinking. As I close my eyes and merge with the music, I begin to rock from within, to feel the motion of the world, the way riding in the back seat of my parents' car used to comfort me and put me to sleep.

But I am not a six year old counting sleep. Tonight my mind returns to Italy, to a night train barrelling along the coast line from Sorrento to Naples. The nearly empty train car hummed and pounded rhythmically, bass like, along the track, a constant strobe to the conversation I shared with an American flutist I met that afternoon. The train forged into darkness, as if I were rolling steadily to a destination and a time I could not foresee. He and I were talking music and politics, poetry and purpose. I found myself telling him Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata made me cry. That it reached within me to the unconscious longings and desires I had not yet found a voice to express.

"Beethoven must have been a great lover," he turned to me and said. "To have that kind of power and restraint, to know just when to let go and explode from within, to exhale and release all the chaos from his mind and body."

I don't know if he was right about that, but tonight as I listen to Beethoven, I am thrust into motion again. I am back on that train moving quickly and fiercely through the thick night. The train winding up a mountainside darkened by shadows of moonlight pines and telephone wires. My voice echoing off the distant river canyons, drifting on the wind to the towns below me. My song so tremulous and pounding that the pines bristle, and the moon tips her light to my face for a moment. I shake off the heaviness in my heart, the way a wolf rustles her fur before stretching.

III. Discoveries

Waking Muses

He told me his dream, how a goddess flows, like a black and white movie,
around a columned temple he explores in solitude,
how the rush of her gown stirs the air as she moves closer to him in a gesture of giving.
She carries a single rose, but before she gives it to him, a thorn pricks her finger.
Her blood dyes the rose brilliant red, the only splash of color
in his dream, and she vanishes before he sees her face,
leaving him a glimpse of white and a sense of loss.

Dreams are funny things, I guess. When he told me his dream
I felt I was the vanishing muse who haunted his sleep for years.
I remembered how his voice echoed around a column
the first time I met him, how the sound of it seemed as familiar as my own.
I say dreams are funny because now I dream of him when I sleep. In
my dreams, he snuggles behind me, arms tight around my waist,
his breath, hot on my neck, stirs my hair, and I hear his voice.
His presence is as real as the rhythmic movements my body
begins, which wake me. I know Freud would say
his absence intensifies my desire and my mind is fulfilling wishes.
But I have to wonder where our restless souls sojourn
while our bodies rest. Maybe we live two lives, the corporeal one,
bound by logic and laws of nature, and one where our spirits explore,
discover muses we hope to find when we wake.

Helios Rising

Back in London. I've come to love this city. The hustle on the tubes, the crowds and lights of Leicester Square, the feeling that things have happened, are happening, and will happen.

I went back to the British Museum to look at the Elgin Marbles. Helios rising was my favorite from the first time I saw it. His lead horse's head rising from the marble horizon, his arm breaching the surface of the water, reaching out toward the day. The subtle curve of his arm and of the horse's head insinuating the curved path of the sun as it travels across the horizon. When the Marbles stood along the Parthenon in Athens, Helios began the whole series, the beginning in the eastern corner. The other figures progressed along the top toward the west, toward Diana, the moon goddess, rising in her own chariot, bringing closure and catching up to Helios.

Thousands of years later, I found myself marvelling at the Greeks' interpretation of time. I stood in the middle of the British Museum, hitting the high points of the collection, checking my watch to make sure I made the next train. The Greeks, me, all of us are mortal, none live forever, but thoughts and passions, as long as we share them, pass them on, will live. Ideas and passions. Isn't that what we remember? What is history but ideas and passions put into words and images, captured and carved in the rock hard element of human memory?

When I was eight, I wanted to be an archaeologist. My teacher that year sent some of us to the library for a few hours each week, just to keep us occupied. We learned things faster than the others and got bored sooner. He sent us to the library to explore, and we did. I loved my time in the library. I read about the American Civil War, squirrels that could fly, and King Tut. I scoured the shelves for more and more books about archaeology and Ancient Egypt. I wanted to be an archaeologist--to dig deep into the earth's layers and discover history, to touch objects unseen for thousands of years, and to learn how people before us lived.

As I moved through the British Museum, I relived the eagerness of eight years old, stirred by the prospect of seeing the Rosetta Stone first hand. In my mind, the Rosetta Stone filled a whole hall and sparkled with the marbled knowledge of language, a gateway to unlocking the mysteries of another people, a first step in understanding the words they carved and colored on the walls of their temples and tombs. I wandered through the dimly lit museum hall and walked right past the Rosetta Stone without seeing it. I circled around columns from Egyptian temples, faced a looming facade of an Egyptian prince, which I named Ozymandias, and skirted other tourists speaking in languages I could not understand

but knew to be French, German, or Italian. When I finally stumbled upon the Rosetta Stone, I could not comprehend its size. It was no more than three feet wide and four feet long. Greek and Ancient Egyptian carved into its face glowed white against the black of the stone. Those words changed history. The Greek gave archaeologists insights into interpreting the Ancient Egyptian which had baffled them for so long. Greek and Egyptian side by side, working together to tell a story which had been silent for thousands of years. Words and images revealing passions and ideas of a people whose ways were as unknown as the origins of their pyramids.

The Rosetta Stone and the Elgin Marbles worked into my imagination as I rode the Underground train from Bloomsbury to Trafalgar Square to meet an American friend for dinner. The words and the images jumbled in my mind, stirred my thoughts. I remembered again the passion I discovered at eight when I plundered the Gray Elementary Library for anything I could find about ancient people. The train jarred to a stop, and I emerged from the Underground toward flood lit Trafalgar Square where war memorials, art, history, and religion form a boundary for the circular junction of four major streets. I suddenly realized I had become an archaeologist, despite being a student of economics and poetry. The heart of archaeology is, after all, the art of discovery. The heart of poetry is taking those discoveries, treasure buried within the rock hard elements of human experience and passion, and translating those ideas and passions into words and images that will tell the stories of the silent. Creating is breaching the surface of human experience and passion. It is the poet reaching her hand deftly to the clean page and with a few strokes, stretching herself across the horizon. Helios rising. That image captured in marble, thousands of years ago, still speaks to me, calls me into the long, cool hallway of the Museum.

Mosaics

I ate my lunch picnic-style in what would have been someone's home, stretched my bare feet on the Mediterranean grass carpeting ruins where Crayola green lizards skirted the walls, exploring mid-April. I bit into fresh strawberries, their dye staining my hands, and felt close to the ancient Romans. I knew they were no different from me, struggling every day to unearth a new life out of the ashes of the past. I finished my lunch and kept walking through the mazed streets of Pompeii. I met Italian school children who approached me with curiosity. They introduced themselves, Antonio, Lorenzo, Lorenzo, and Alberto. They quizzed me in English, corrected my Italian, and followed me through the ruins, full of stories.

All Lines are Intangible on a Map

"Every one's an exile," he says
"I'm an Englishman exiled
in Wales. You're an exile, too."

Geography has nothing to do with it--
The land doesn't know
when you cross one border for another.
Where do you go when you
don't want to be where you are?

I guess all of us slip away,
imagine a quiet place where
we can wait out the weather.

"Every one's an exile," repeats
an Englishman in Wales
discussing Irish poetry
over tea with this American.

Honeysuckle Vines Along the Roadside

Their blooms spring a
white-yellow surprise of
sunshine,
leaves tender
like lips, innocent kisses

Blossoming deep, their
sweet liquid
hidden inside,
transient, almost
too perfect

to touch
We pull them apart,
seek beauty from
within,
reach inside
to another time when

golden-fading scents drift
summer days, playgrounds,
hide-and-seek and running for home

Map Legend

I travelled many roads
to be with you,
roads connecting
gaps of body and mind
you were afraid to cross.
When you were beside me,
I could not look in your eyes.
You seemed smaller and I
did not want to see the
hollowing thinness of your eyes,
could not face what I lost
when I looked at your hands,
eyes, lips, did not want
to feel them all over me.
I did not know where our
lives intersected, without the map
outlining these weathered roads.

Treasure

La Rambla they call it and I wonder why. Maybe it's the ramble to the sea, the run-on words bobbing like October apples toward the horizon. Phrases cryptic as a treasure map. I don't speak the language, can't ask directions. From where I stand the world looks flat. We're oceans apart. Me, chasing guitar echoes with a stranger who thinks he's discovered beauty in my ways. La Rambla they call it, the winding streets merging into the heart-pounding sea where I thought I saw a ship on the horizon. From where I stood in the whispering dark by the fish-swimming water, the world looked flat and I couldn't tell if your ship was coming or going. Now I'm learning the art of exploration. Map in hand, charting moonlit Barcelona.

Driving Through the End of a Rainbow

Driving north on Interstate 81, it's
pouring down rain and the sun is shining.
Swish-slop wipers drum across the horizon.
I'm startled by this flicker of magic
rising from the rain-beaten road in front of me.
This can't be the end no one ever finds.
No pot of gold, no cunning leprechaun.
On the other side of the rainbow,
a bright yellow Hertz moving van,
it had been in front of me the whole time.

What is this treasure I've found?
Maybe it is the moving,
the forging ahead, new places to explore.
Maybe treasures are the things
worth carrying through one's life.
What would fill my van?

Boxes of photos,
letters never sent, regrets
marked fragile. My life, everything
I own, can't or won't give away,
tucked neatly in boxes, a bold marker
labeling loves, fears, failures, as casually
as kitchen stuff, books, miscellaneous.
My treasure is moving forward. My gold,
sturdy boxes jostling on the highway.

These Small Rituals

It had been weeks since I ordered Chinese food.
I didn't want to eat it without you,
didn't want to miss that intimacy
we had ritualized over the last few months,
when you would reach your chop sticks,
retrieve uneaten slices of zucchini from my plate,
our arms entwining as I balanced
hot garlic chicken between my chop sticks.
Tonight I ate without you.
The red pepper and soy sauce tingled
on my mouth until my lips burned.
I cradled my chop sticks between my thumb
and forefinger, the way you taught me.
I ate mushrooms, then carrots,
scooped rice into the tiny angle of wood,
neglecting the zucchini I piled in the
corner of the styrofoam take-out box.

Wisdom Tooth

I fear cutting wisdom teeth, knowledge with jagged edges,
tearing through tender gums, shoving childhood teeth from old
positions, and ravaging order. I walk around a sterile lab,
rumblings of the worst clench my stomach.
Gazing into a mirror I search for newly erupted molars, see
two pristine teeth hanging from the back of my mouth
like stalactites guarding the entrance to my wind pipe.
I lay aside the mirror. A left incisor wiggles.
I don't want to lose this tooth, leave a gap in my mouth,
but I can't resist the urge to wiggle it, feel it breaking roots.
It falls painlessly into my hand, revealing a more perfect tooth
buried under the old one. Alarmed I seek help from the dentist
in the white coat and rubber gloves who tells me
this tooth will bring problems for me, contains many layers,
a calcified Russian doll, each outer shell revealing another inside.
I will lose more outer teeth before finding the true one at the heart.

Taking Off the Life Jacket

The wind hollowed out the seashore of my bed and called to me like seagulls in flight, appealing to my lust for movement and travel. I'd never been one to settle, like the grains of sand I rested on in the hot summer of my return home. I would never allow myself to be tossed by chance, to be suspended like a fishing fly in the reel of time, the current of opportunity. I wanted to set the rhythm, control the give and take of the line until my wrist snapped back, strong in the struggle, my body arching in the tense moment when two wills are striving to retain their independence. I feared being the fish. Feared fate might catch me swimming, weak against the current. Now I am learning to be both fisher and fish, to give and take, in the moment, to be free of myself, on the crest of other elements, arching in the air, suspended like birds on a seaward wind.

Left to My Own Desires, Saying Goodbye Would Be Impossible

When I was three years old, my mom took me once a week to Bessie and Arthur's house,
at the bottom of the railroad tracks.
All I remember of Bessie is the hem of her housedress, violet and smothered with gaudy
flowers in the sunlight,
the only part of her I could see without being blinded by the haze of summer shining
toward the dirtbed garden.
The cherry tomato plants, bushy and brilliant against the hillside, their primary colors,
perfect bulbs of juiciness
I sucked into my mouth whole, biting down with milk teeth until the juice and seeds split
the warm skin
and exploded against my teeth, my tongue. One time I ate so many my stomach ached and
mom told me I could have no more
unless she was there to dole them out within reason, and not upset the delicate balance
between a growing
appetite for pleasure and the whimpering of indigestion she would have to soothe if I were
left to my own desires.
I know what that memory has to do with my life now, why I recently remembered those
cherry tomatoes. It is
the memory of bare feet on warm up-turned earth, the green of the vines, and the
temptation of ripe fruit that
calls me back to the garden, to recognize a face of love. But it is not Bessie's face I see
when I look up. It is
your face a few inches above me in the near dark when we have come too close to making
love, your breath-edged voice
pulsing in my ear, discovering that desire is a powerful thing which must be
rationed between us.

Vita

Libby Derting was born in Kingsport, Tennessee, and claims Johnson City, Tennessee, as her home. She earned a B.A. in Economics from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in 1994. After beginning graduate studies in English at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in 1994, she lived in Swansea, Wales, as a Rotary International Ambassadorial Scholar for the 1995-96 year. She returned to Knoxville in the fall of 1996 to continue work on a M. A. in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing. While completing her M.A., she worked as an Assistant Hall Director for the University of Tennessee Department of Residence Halls. After completing her M.A., she will begin law school at the George Washington University School of Law in Washington, D.C. Although she will pursue a career in law, she plans to continue writing and hopes to publish more poetry.