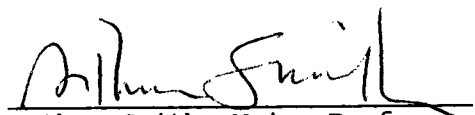
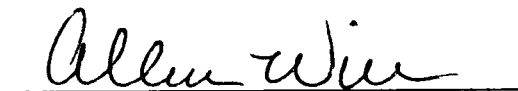
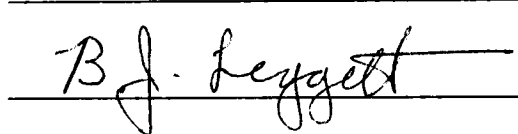


To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Juliana Gray entitled "Driven By Two Hearts: Poems." 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.

  
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

DRIVEN BY TWO HEARTS  
Poems

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

Juliana Gray  
May 1997

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## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated  
to Brad Vice  
who is my best reader  
and my best love.

## Acknowledgments

Before thanking the wonderful people at the University of Tennessee who helped me reach this peak, I must thank those who preceded them. At the University of Alabama, I owe thanks to Thomas Rabbitt and John Allison, whose early criticism and encouragement led me to pursue this odd line of work.

At the University of Tennessee, I wish to thank the Department of English for its support, both financial and academic. B. J. Leggett, Marilyn Kallet and Allen Wier contributed much to these poems and to my understanding of poetry. Most importantly, Arthur Smith has guided my work and my ideas with the utmost patience and care for the last two years, and my largest thanks are due to him.

I also wish to acknowledge my parents for not protesting when their daughter informed them that she had chosen poetry for her career.

And finally, my-soon-to-be husband Brad Vice deserves more thanks than I can convey here for his support, his criticism, his encouragement, and his love.

## Abstract

The pages that follow comprise a collection of the poems this author has written or revised during her two-year term of study as a candidate for the Master's degree in English at the University of Tennessee. The poems articulate the author's opinions and feelings on a variety of subjects ranging from human relationships to nature to humor. These poems are accompanied by an introduction explaining the author's poetry aesthetic, which combines elements of rhythm, development of meaning, conciseness of expression and the subject's relevance to the speaker.

## Table of Contents

|                                                       |    |
|-------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Introduction . . . . .                                | 1  |
| Poems . . . . .                                       | 11 |
| Crossing . . . . .                                    | 12 |
| Moment . . . . .                                      | 13 |
| Piecemeal . . . . .                                   | 14 |
| Dao, sans Dwin . . . . .                              | 15 |
| Chickenhouse . . . . .                                | 16 |
| The Kindest Way to Kill a Lobster . . . . .           | 17 |
| Haircuttings . . . . .                                | 18 |
| Dead Baby Dreams . . . . .                            | 19 |
| To a Five-Cent Package of Writing Paper . . . . .     | 20 |
| Venison Dreams . . . . .                              | 21 |
| Turtle Mothers . . . . .                              | 22 |
| Funeral for a Friend: A Dream . . . . .               | 23 |
| The Autonomy of Animals . . . . .                     | 24 |
| Pieces of Eight . . . . .                             | 25 |
| Keepsake . . . . .                                    | 26 |
| My Grandmother's Nipples . . . . .                    | 27 |
| Lightning Bugs . . . . .                              | 30 |
| Box Turtle . . . . .                                  | 31 |
| Papercut . . . . .                                    | 32 |
| Group Photo . . . . .                                 | 33 |
| Kali of the Wiregrass . . . . .                       | 34 |
| Panty Thief . . . . .                                 | 35 |
| The Panty Thief in Jail . . . . .                     | 36 |
| Rain Dance . . . . .                                  | 37 |
| The Ghost in Butler County Jail . . . . .             | 38 |
| She-Turtle's Grave . . . . .                          | 39 |
| Chocolate Muse . . . . .                              | 40 |
| On Purchasing <u>Modern Brides</u> Magazine . . . . . | 41 |
| Visiting Writer, Inner City Schools . . . . .         | 42 |
| Flute . . . . .                                       | 43 |
| American Candy . . . . .                              | 44 |
| Carcass . . . . .                                     | 45 |
| My mother made bagels . . . . .                       | 46 |
| Monday, Waiting . . . . .                             | 47 |
| Trails . . . . .                                      | 48 |
| Shelf Space . . . . .                                 | 49 |
| Lesson . . . . .                                      | 50 |
| Bibliography . . . . .                                | 51 |
| Vita . . . . .                                        | 54 |

## Introduction

On the first night of my first poetry workshop at the University of Tennessee, I sat somewhere in the anonymous middle of the classroom. There were about twenty students, none of whom I knew, waiting with me, all of us with our pens and paper at the ready to take down the usual information-- how many poems would be due that semester, whether there would be a paper, what were the grading standards. When Dr. Arthur Smith arrived, he quickly covered those basics, but it was alarmingly clear from his demeanor that he did not intend to release us that easily. We shifted in our desks.

Without warning, I heard my name being called.

"Miss Gray," the professor said, smiling, "what is poetry?"

I cannot remember how I answered that question, though I am sure I did not answer it well. I was so stunned at the simultaneous simplicity and impossibility of the question that I am surprised I was able to answer at all. St. Augustine wrote that he knew perfectly well what time was until he was asked to explain it; this is how I felt--and still feel--about poetry.

The fact that so many poems have been written about poetry is a testament to the difficulty of pinning down this subject. And if poets of the caliber of Wallace Stevens and W.B. Yeats were unable to solve the problem, I know that I have no chance of answering that awful question. The best I can hope to do is answer for myself, to explain what poetry means to me, why I write it, in what ways it differs from prose and what I hope to accomplish through it. In this introduction

to my master's thesis, I will try to address those issues and relate them not only to my own work, but also the poems and essays of those writers I admire.

One of the aspects of poetry which most attracts me is also perhaps the most obvious trait that separates it from prose: the length. Verbosity in poetry, prose or speech can become so tiresome that one wishes the user had never learned the language. Poetry's economic use of words to conjure images and emotions on the page and in the mind of the reader intrigues me in a way that no other form does. A sonnet can accomplish the same meaning or emotion in fourteen lines that a story or essay might take pages to create. By this statement I do not mean to degrade fiction or essays, only to hold up poetry as perhaps a finer way to accomplish many of the same goals of edification and entertainment. At its best, poetry is the perfect distillation of an idea or emotion to its essence, the perfect conciseness of expression. A poem like Charles Simic's "Prodigy" or James Wright's "Autumn Begins in Martin's Ferry, Ohio" can condense the speaker's emotions into a handful of images which, when structured and combined, leave the reader feeling the emotional equivalent of a punch to the gut. While that reaction may sound violent, it is the sort of reaction I most enjoy receiving and want to achieve in my own poems; to affect a reader so intensely that after finishing the poem, he or she must take a moment to recover.

Of course, not all poems are short; but most of those that I admire--and model my own poetry after--are. While I appreciate "The Waste Land," I believe "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is a more

direct and accessible address of many of the same ideas of twentieth-century alienation and disillusionment. Most of the longer poems I have read fall into cycles of repetition or, conversely, branch out into areas so diverse that the poem loses sight of its central subject. All but one of the poems I have included in my thesis are less than a page long, most of them around twenty lines. The one longer poem, "My Grandmother's Nipples," is the result of an assignment to imitate Robert Hass's "My Mother's Nipples." Like Hass's, my poem is broken into parts which I believe could stand on their own as individual poems, but work together to form a more complete and affecting whole. So while I prefer shorter poems in general, I must admit that I consider this longer poem of mine to be one of the strongest works in my thesis.

While most poems are short, they are not simple. One cannot describe a scene, such as a landscape, and expect that description alone to succeed as a poem, no matter how lovely the view. A poem cannot end in the same position in which it began; as in fiction, if nothing has changed from beginning to end, there is no reason to read the piece, and the author has achieved nothing. The poem must make a discovery about itself in the course of the telling. This discovery need not be a life-changing revelation, but enough change or intensification of ideas or emotion must take place that the reader is left with a somewhat different impression than that with which he or she began the poem. Wallace Stevens's "The Snow Man," for example, does not radically change its perspective in the course of its fifteen lines, but the explanation in the last six lines of why "one must have

a mind of winter" creates enough of a ripple or complication that the poem does not end on the same note on which it began.

Often the discovery which takes place in a poem is linked to the memory of its speaker. As with the landscape, the telling of a memory is not enough; in the best poems, the speaker learns something about this memory as he or she relates it. One might call this type of writing confessional poetry, but that is a label I dislike. It implies that the poet is a sinner or criminal who should be punished. But memory is not always tied to guilt; the discovery in the poem can just as easily be one of joy as one of regret. Even the so-called "confessional poets"—Berryman, Plath, Sexton, Lowell—were in the end only people, no more or less sinful than any of their readers, only more expressive and perhaps self-indulgent in their delvings into their pasts. A poet can be personal without being confessional, and it is this balance that I try to achieve in my own work.

My poems often deal with memories, some of which are paired with regretful discoveries. I strive to avoid self-indulgence in these works, to relate what is relevant and then move on to the more important discovery of the present. This separation of the wheat from the chaff is one of the most difficult things I have had to learn as a writer. It is hard to kill one's children; and when I have had to lop off all but a few lines of a poem and begin again, I at first resisted, but learned to see the reasoning. My poems have improved drastically since I learned to sacrifice the unnecessary parts of them and stick to the heart of the issue. "To a Five-Cent Package of Writing Paper," for example, has gone through several second stanzas, and may yet shed

the one it currently wears if I find it is leading the poem in the wrong direction. Revision is the cure for self-indulgence, in poetry or in prose. Writers must not be afraid to kill their children.

As far as form is concerned, I have no hard and fast requirements. I generally write in free verse, since, as its name implies, that form provides the fewest impediments between me and my subject. Lately I have begun to experiment with prose poetry, and have been surprised to find that I enjoy it very much. Before I wrote my first prose poem I expected it to feel like cheating, straddling the line between fiction and poetry with neither foot firmly planted. But I found the form to be liberating and charged with a different kind of intensity. Since the line breaks were arbitrary, I was forced to work within the lines and sentences to create new layers of meaning. Again, Robert Hass has been my model for this form in his books Human Wishes and Sun Under Wood. James Wright, too, wrote prose pieces in addition to free verse poetry, but I am not competent to attempt his magic tricks such as concealing a Petrarchan sonnet within a prose paragraph. Neither of these poets writes exclusively prose poetry, and I do not believe I should, either. Some subjects are suited to the form, and others are not; I have to feel my way through a poem before I know how to begin writing it. I have only included two prose pieces in this thesis, "Box Turtle" and sections of "My Grandmother's Nipples," which is again an imitation of the mixture of forms Hass uses in his poem "My Mother's Nipples." I feel that the mixture of forms works well in "My Grandmother's Nipples," where the prose sections used for exposition are mixed with free verse and dialogue sections. I am still uncertain

about the poem "Box Turtle," which is a prose revision of an earlier free verse poem. The poem seems to work better in prose, but I have not yet determined why. I intend to experiment more with prose poetry in my later writing and develop a theory of why certain subjects are better suited to that form; for now, I must rely on unsteady instinct.

As for metrics, my opinions have undergone a change recently. When I first began writing poetry as an undergraduate at the University of Alabama, most of my poems were written in syllabics in imitation of Theodore Roethke. ("The Autonomy of Animals" is an early example.) I felt that working within a strict syllabic formula would force me to make unexpected word choices, thereby making the poem "freer" than it would have been in true free verse.

At the University of Tennessee I largely abandoned syllabics, though I kept the lines of the poems within three or four syllables of each other (poems such as "Keepsake" and "My mother made bagels" are examples of this). Though I counted the syllables and kept the lines approximately the same length, I did not write in any strict meter or keep track of the beats of the lines.

But a few months ago I read Robert Hass's essay "Listening and Making" from his book Twentieth Century Pleasures. In that essay, Hass discusses the importance of the beats of a line, how they are separated by the caesuras in a line, and how they move through the poem, changing in accordance with the changing mood or meaning of the piece. Hass writes,

The search for meaning in the content and shape in the rhythm are simultaneous, equivalent. That's why it doesn't matter too much which a writer attends to in composition, because the process attends to both. It is possible . . . to pay attention consciously to one or the other exclusively; more

often, writers experience a continual shifting back and forth between formal problems and problems of content, carrying the work forward at whichever level it wants to move. In the long run, though, no work can be alive, intelligent, imaginatively open, intense, at one level and not the other.

Hass intersperses this criticism with insightful analyses of the uses of beats and pauses in free verse poems by Gary Snyder, Walt Whitman and others. This essay showed me another reason why I like some of the poems I do; whether or not I am aware of them as I read, those rhythms work on me as a reader. They can either rock me along to sleep or contemplation or build tension to the breaking point. Looking back at poets such as James Wright, I was surprised to find that their rhythms work in exactly the manner Hass describes; and while I was not conscious of the rhythms, they still achieved the desired effect.

I was even more surprised when I turned to my own work and found that I was already employing some of the rhythmic techniques Hass outlines. "Pieces of Eight," for example, is a free verse poem with seventeen lines ranging from seven to thirteen syllables long, most of them ten or eleven. When I broke the lines down into beats and pauses as Hass does, a distinct pattern began to emerge. The numbers represent the beats in a line or phrase, with the slash representing a pause or caesura in the line. The poem begins fairly evenly. The first four lines set up the first part of the conflict, and these lines are short--2/2, 1/2, 1/2, 1/2. As the second part of the conflict is introduced, the rhythm shifts to 2/2, 3/2, 3/2, 3/2. Then follow two short lines in which the speaker admits her inability to reconcile the conflict; here the rhythm almost collapses into 3/1 and 3. The rhythm recovers in the next five lines which attempt to work out a

resolution: 2/2, 3/3, 2/3, 2/2, 2/3. In the last two lines the speaker admits defeat, and the rhythm falls flat into 4 and 3 beats per line.

This creation of rhythm was unconscious and is therefore clumsy. Yet the rhythm is not quite accidental; one knows as one writes that a certain adjective should be two syllables, or that three monosyllabic words should be used in a particular place. If someone had asked me why those particular beats were needed, my best answer probably would have been that they "just sound better." Now I understand that my "ear" was picking up on rhythms my mind had not yet realized. After reading Hass, I understand that the balance and movement of rhythm is just as important to creating meaning in a poem as the meanings of the individual words. The poems in this thesis do not reflect this recent revelation; it is far too fresh for me to have worked out its applications. But I expect that this move toward a conscious employment of rhythm will be the next development in my poetry. I now have a much more practical understanding of this principle that lies under the surface of free verse, and I hope that through practice and experimentation, I can become adept at its use.

Thus far I have written specifically on poetic techniques and forms, applying them to particular poems where applicable. Now I feel that I should speak more generally on the themes that pervade my own work and the motivations behind those poems. The two major themes of my poetry are nature and relationships among people. In most of the poems, these themes intersect; in almost all of the nature poems there is a human perspective and some issue of the human intrusion into the animal world. "The Autonomy of Animals" is one poem which addresses

this conflict directly; others, such as "Trails," are more oblique. While I am not what anyone would call an environmental activist, I am concerned with the problems of the larger world and the human exploitation of natural resources. These issues are largely dealt with in my poems through animals, often drawing on memories of personal experiences with that world. I try to stay away from politics and focus instead on the personal. These poems are attempts to reconcile my own behavior and the behavior of others with the natural world. In some poems, such as "The Kindest Way to Kill a Lobster," the subject is dealt with playfully; in others, such as "Lightning Bugs" or "Carcass," it is very grave. In neither the poems nor in my own mind are these issues resolved; my poems are attempts to work through the problems as best I can and to articulate the conflict within myself.

I stated earlier that most poems deal with the memory of the speaker. This comes into play most often in my poems which deal with human relationships. In my poems, these relationships are usually those of my family. As with most families, there are mixed emotions involved. "Monday, Waiting," one of my most recent poems, is itself a wavering blend of apathy and love. "Venison Dreams" is a poem of distrust; "The Ghost in Butler County Jail" deals with love turned to hate; "My mother made bagels" is a celebration of familial love. There are also romantic love poems, such as "Keepsake" and "Shelf Space." Whatever the content, I have attempted to address the issue of the poem as directly as I can, without sentimentality.

I have also tried recently to introduce more humor into my poetry. As I mature and grow away from the teenage angst which characterized my earliest poetic attempts, I feel freer to relax and enjoy the more pleasant moments, and to convey that enjoyment through my poems. The pair of poems "Panty Thief" and "The Panty Thief in Jail" share a lighthearted perspective on a subject which could be very somber and disturbing. "On Purchasing Modern Brides Magazine" is playful and satirical in tone without (I hope) turning vicious. It is difficult to write humorous material, and I do not feel that I have mastered the technique, but it is a type of writing with which I feel more and more comfortable, and hope to experiment with more in the future.

While my poems and my understanding of poetry have improved dramatically since my first workshop at the University of Tennessee, I still do not have an adequate answer for the question "what is poetry." Robert Frost said it was a "way of taking life by the throat;" Coleridge called it "the best words in their best order;" Wordsworth described it as "the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge;" Eliot defined it as "not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion . . . not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality." There are other definitions as pithy as these, enough to fill a book. None of them are perfect, of course; Wordsworth's definition may have been right for his own time and situation but totally unsuited for Eliot's, just as Eliot's was unsuited for Frost's. For me, poetry is a concise and rhythmical expression of memory or emotion, most often rooted in the past but crucially linked to the

present, which turns a corner in its telling to discover something new about itself. I expect that this definition will change as my poetry changes and I learn more about the process of prosody, but for now, this is as close as I can come to slaying the hydra. The poems in this thesis are my attempts to fulfill my own definition, and I think they are largely successful. Like the hydra, the problems solved in one poem reappear in another, though usually in an altered form. The best I can hope to do is keep cutting until I reach the heart of the beast.

## Poems

## Crossings

Their dark eyes, round and perfect, pass over me.  
This is our arrangement. I see them now  
as I never did then, taking shape in the brush near  
the edge of the highway. Their haunches bulge into  
gorgeous knots; their necks curve down with intent.  
Once, when I was eight years old, six deer unfolded  
from the woods in south Alabama and leaped over  
my family's car. The last one's hoof left  
a starburst in my window as it kicked the air.  
I never saw them coming, only their flashing tails  
as they bounded into the grass on the other side.  
Strange, then, that they are so clear to me now.  
As if apologizing for my head being turned  
the wrong direction those years ago, they approach  
me now behind closed eyes: smooth flanks, velvet antlers,  
walking towards me on bronze hooves almost too delicate  
to support them. Their black eyes stare into mine,  
a benediction whose language I have just begun to learn.

## Moment

The university is cut off from the river  
by a four-lane highway, as if to keep  
the students from jumping in.  
Driving to work one morning,  
I saw through the fog drifting ashore  
a bird that I recognized as a sandhill crane,  
even though I had never seen one.

The world was sketched with  
gentle brushstrokes on rice paper  
and scented with jasmine tea. The crane  
posed like an S in the gray light,  
its feet lost in the water.  
It did not look at me as I drove past,  
but at the water, rippling around its legs,  
carrying its reflection back to Japan,  
or Ohio, or memory, the country of its birth.

## Piecemeal

On a documentary last week I saw a pair of Siamese twins,  
baby girls, who were about to be separated.  
It was hard to watch the rough operation  
on such a body, making two smaller selves.  
I thought how comforting it must have been,  
whenever one was in pain, to turn her head  
and find herself again. What strength there must be  
in a body driven by two hearts.

Sometimes the people I used to be visit me  
in dreams, dim figures on a hill waving hello,  
or goodbye, or just trying to be seen.  
If they are calling, their voices are wind.  
If they regret themselves, the turns  
in my life that stranded them in memory  
and dream, I cannot read their faces.  
Awake, I cannot remember. My twins are all gone.  
Whatever I have left of myself  
I wind tight around my bones, desperate  
not to let slip the treasures I cannot name.

## Dao, sans Dwin

It was hard to say "I" and mean only myself,  
not the Dao-and-Dwin self that was "I"  
for the first three years of our life.  
We were joined at the hip, sharing  
three legs, genitals, a vast tangle of organs.  
We had clothes pieced together with lattices  
of buttons, zippers, velcro swatches,  
whatever it took to make two outfits into one.  
Family videos show us scampering through the house,  
happy little freaks, chattering in a language of our own.  
I can no longer understand my own voice on the tape.

I remember the separation, being broken apart  
in stages. When we lay in two beds for the first time,  
we were placed on sides opposite where we had found  
each other all our lives. I flailed my left arm  
while Dwin cried on my right. Mother says we were angry  
at each other for weeks, each thinking ourselves abandoned.  
I resemble my twin more closely now  
than when we were the same person. My body  
is a network of scars, delicate lines that look like "I."

## Chickenhouse

The smell of sun-baked manure blowing  
through the vents as I drive down the interstate  
coils in my gut. I used to love that rich smell  
of my grandparents' farm in the long shadeless summers  
of my childhood. When my grandfather worked  
in the chickenhouse he let me follow so I could thrill  
at standing at the end of the conveyor belt,  
wiping fly specks off the warm eggs, settling  
them points-up in flats. He'd give me some change  
and drive to a farm where he threw the birds smothered  
by the heat to a clan of pigs. Bone, feathers,  
beaks, all went down their greedy throats.  
A few years later he shot his wife.  
I remember now the huge metal fans  
at both ends of the hothouse,  
blowing dirty feathers in the air.

### **The Kindest Way to Kill a Lobster**

Snip the bitter bands that hold his claws;  
let him roam free on the countertop.  
Stroke the plate between his eye stalks.  
When he walks, his tails strikes the cutting board  
like a metronome. Listen to his music.  
While he still half-dreams in refrigerated sleep,  
return him to the churning brine he used to know,  
spreading the fronds of his tail again,  
if only for a moment, swimming until  
his entire body blushes and bends.

## Haircuttings

It's impossible  
to get them off  
by brushing,  
so I blow,  
lip to lobe,  
into his ear,  
my breath  
rushing  
through nautilus  
curves, whistling  
past his ear drum  
and giving  
the tiny  
balance bones  
a shiver,  
down the line  
of his jaw and  
into his throat,  
spiralling past  
the breathing and beating  
to blossom,  
finally,  
in the box of his hips  
like a warm spill  
of music  
charging  
his body.  
"Ooo," he says.  
"Oooh," I breathe back.

## Dead Baby Dreams

This time the situation is an episode of Mad About You. Paul and Jamie's baby has died because Paul gave it a Coke. They have told no one. Jamie cries in the kitchen while Paul entertains the guests. The laughtrack rumbles over their grief.

The others have been worse, like the one in which a plastic doll the size of my thumb and threaded with looping wires is cut from my bloodless belly; or the midnight scene where the baby is snatched from my arms by a starving post-apocalyptic survivor-- I shoot at the thief, but hit the bundle he carries.

I wake from my sitcom nightmare dewy with sweat in a hotel bed. On the drive home from Louisville, we pass a field of morning bluegrass dotted with cows. A calf stumbles down the hill, its blocky head nodding with each step. We are half a mile away before he reaches his mother, but I know, I know, that she welcomed him.

### To a Five-Cent Package of Writing Paper

You were my father's Christmas present that year  
when all the children in his grade school class  
drew names, and on the appointed day all but one,  
the boy who had drawn my father, brought their gifts.  
When the teacher realized they were short  
she rifled her desk for something a boy might like.  
All she came up with was you. It was then,  
as he fingered the band that held you together,  
that my father knew that he was poor.

My own Christmases have always been lavish.  
My sister and I were overcome with gifts  
we could not name and whose uses he had to explain.  
He told me this story on one of those rare occasions  
when he felt he could trust me, late at night  
with a glass of scotch in his hand. After he left  
I lay with the pity like poison in my gut,  
crying for an old shame not my own, his gift to me  
that made me wretched with wealth.

## Venison Dreams

I must have been six or seven years old when this happened. Awakened one night by the smell of dirty pennies, I slipped downstairs and saw my parents working over fresh meat on our table. I rubbed my eyes as I watched Dad carve out manageable chunks with our biggest knife and Mom circled with a sponge to catch the streaming blood. They did not speak, as if to keep their deeds secret even from each other.

I cannot remember now if they saw me there, watching, and sent me back upstairs to bed, or if I slipped away from their grim work and lay awake listening in the dark. I hope I was quiet enough, small enough, quick enough to get away. I hope they never discover what I saw in them.

## Turtle Mothers

It must be hard for them, the sad-eyed mothers,  
to join in the restless ocean  
where the waves tear such unwieldy bodies  
apart, to conceive among the eelgrass.  
They sculpt within themselves hundreds of imperfect  
little globes; this, too, is harder  
than I can know. When the turtle mothers  
emerge on shore, a gradual parade  
of wrinkled Venuses, it must be hard to surrender  
that which they have made, their children,  
to bury them and leave. For surely they remember  
the sudden churning of sand and the first  
hazel eye blinking in the sun, the tender  
green swarm rushing clumsily for the water—  
then the gulls, and the crabs, and the dogs.  
Only a few survive to discover  
that they can swim. I have never seen the ocean,  
but I know what every loggerhead or hawksbill  
matriarch knows—that though they lay their clutches  
in dozens or hundreds, there will never be enough.

## Funeral for a Friend: A Dream

This is the funeral I never went to:  
A bright day, leaves still clinging  
to the trees as their colors warp.  
No shade favors this plot.

In a grassy space planted with stones  
they stand in their good clothes, a few  
lonely mourners with at least  
this death in common.

To one side the father and mother  
stand together again, briefly,  
as the white coffin is lowered on ropes  
and silent pulleys.

The field darkens and shifts as images appear,  
quick and stark like a series of  
midnight tableaux revealed  
in a lightning flash--

a girl--a knife--a grinning jack-o-lantern  
man--my friend violated, unspeakable--  
soft sunrise on a long white shape  
lying in weeds.

Even in dream I know I'm to blame  
for none of this, but doubts still twist  
in my heart: what if I'd been there,  
still been her friend?

The stiff figures, rigid in grief,  
take damp lumps of clay in their hands  
and throw them on the immaculate lid  
where they clatter and break.

The women's heels sink into the earth  
as if seeking to follow her down.  
I follow her now, buried under  
my sheets in the dark.

## The Autonomy of Animals

I.

In Brazil there are scarlet frogs,  
no bigger than an eyeball, whose  
venom can bring down birds, monkeys  
and careless men. Their baleful skin  
pulses a warning with each breath.

II.

When she was three years old, playing  
outside, my sister was eaten  
by ants. A failed cartwheel landed  
her in their bed, and they covered  
her like a seething quilt. Naked  
and screaming, she stood in the white  
kitchen sink while my mother rubbed  
meat tenderizer into red  
welts. I cried, watching her slapping  
ants off my sister's legs and face.

III.

A bat crept into our classroom  
yesterday. It scuttled around  
the perimeter of the room  
like a crippled insect, shying  
from our squeals. A man seized its clawed  
wingtips to carry it outside.  
Only then did it try to bite.

## Pieces of Eight

Learning history, it is easy to hate  
the Spanish, for Cortes and De Soto,  
for slavery and disease and the simple  
discovery of an immaculate place.  
But my friend Raul is the gentlest person  
I have ever known. He sends me letters  
on petal-thin stationery and writes poetry  
he is too shy to translate. I don't know  
what to make of this, of history  
and how it engenders the present.  
I don't understand how the conquistadors  
decided which pieces of Inca or Aztec art  
to transport intact, and which to melt down.  
Raul by himself is not a history,  
and the Seminole casinos are no apocalypse.  
I might as well curse all of time,  
and curse myself for living.

## Keepsake

Back from running, he described the turtles,  
just hatched in the creekbeds and stumbling  
across the road to the lake. "They're too small  
to see from a car, so a lot of them  
are already dead. I must have carried  
forty of them over to the water."  
He never mentioned them again; maybe  
he showered the memory away  
along with his light spring sweat. But I remember.  
I see him hugging the lake's circumference,  
breathing the fog curling from its surface.  
He pauses, lifts something too small to be real,  
and saves it. This is the picture of him  
that I love the most, clutched inside my heart.

## **My Grandmother's Nipples** (after Hass)

I remember the water in her toilet was blue,  
the first I'd ever seen, and that I used  
to marvel at the cerulean swirls of the flush.  
Also in that bathroom she used to bathe  
with my sister and me, three women in one tub.  
When I think of this now, I forget my sister  
was there, as she has forgotten.

At home, it was just us girls in the tub  
with Mom on the outside, reaching in  
to scrub us or rinse our soapy heads  
under the faucet. We struggled, banging  
our temples on the spigot or crying  
when shampoo trickled into our eyes.

The warm water in Grandmother's tub frothed  
with a little bubble bath, just enough  
to obscure what lay beneath. I had never  
seen a grown woman naked and was afraid  
to look at her. She didn't seem to notice,  
talking to us easily as she showed us  
how to soap our washcloths. I don't remember  
her nipples, only the push of her breasts  
as she reached for us. The dark shape  
in her lap grew clearer as the bubbles died,  
until I could see the hairs waving like grass.  
Someday, I thought, my body will look like that.

\*\*\*

What I knew about my grandfather:

He was my grandmother's second husband, my father's stepfather. He  
owned a chickenhouse, where I sometimes followed him and placed the  
eggs rolling down conveyor belts in cardboard flats. He had a collie  
named Cokey, one of whose puppies was my pet for a short while. At  
the end of the day he would give me some change for putting up eggs  
and drive to a neighbor's farm, where he threw that day's suffocated  
hens to a pen of hogs. We did not know when he died, but learned of  
it eight years later when my mother called the prison to ask if there  
would be a parole hearing, to make sure there was no chance he would  
ever get out.

\*\*\*

Willodene.  
It may be the strangest name  
I have ever heard.

My father  
has shown me pictures of her  
when she was young.  
She looks a lot like me,  
he says, and I can see it  
in her cheekbones.  
Her smile in those pictures,  
standing beside a giant car  
with her first husband, my Paw-Paw,  
is wider and brighter than any  
I remember seeing her give.

\*\*\*

Eleven years old, home from school,  
I found a note from my parents telling us  
to go across the street to the neighbors,  
who would take care of us for a few days.

The neighbor. "Was your granddaddy ever mean to you?"

"No." Getting scared. "He sleeps most of the time when we go over there."

"Have you ever seen him get mad and do something mean?"

"Well, he yells at Cokey sometimes."

Stroking my hair. "Think about that. Think about what someone who gets mad like that might do if he got real mad. I'll talk to you some more about it tomorrow." Her way of being gentle.

\*\*\*

A year before, she had come to live with us. In the way adults have of not explaining difficult things to children, my parents left me to come up with my own reasons. I thought it was a wonderful visit. We fixed up the study downstairs with a daybed and lamps and brought in a heater. She bought me ice cream and worked in the garden. Sometimes letters came for her, but she threw them away. A couple of times flowers were delivered to our house, but I wasn't allowed to read the cards. One night after a few months, she got a call saying that her house in Greenville had burned down, and she had to go back.

Months later we visited her there at the trailer they'd mounted on the old foundation. The two trailers joined together to make something that looked like a house, but a raised seam ran down the middle of the living room. She had lost most of her rings and other valuables in the fire. Granddaddy had been out, eating dinner in town, when it happened. My father wouldn't speak to him.

\*\*\*

The rest I have learned from newspaper clippings  
that my parents hid but friends saved for me.  
When she went home the last time, after living with us again  
for a few months, she stayed with a couple up the road,  
waiting for a time when she knew he would be gone  
so she could collect her things from the broken house,  
on top of the burned house. He found her first,  
and shot the three of them, killing my grandmother  
and the wife, her friend, then turned himself in.

No part of my grandmother, the nipples or cheekbones  
or any trace of that smile, remains. He obliterated  
the things he loved the most. The coffin was closed  
at her funeral. For a long time I imagined  
that our house was haunted, that she was still there  
watching and talking to me. I thought I could feel her  
brush past me in the study where she slept,  
or stroke my hair when I was alone.  
I longed for that ghost. I have a few things:  
a pin, a hairnet, a few scraps of charred linoleum  
peeled up from where her kitchen used to be.  
I have a dark spot in my heart and a taste for hatred.  
You look a lot like her, my father says,  
and we both pretend it is true.

## Lightning Bugs

Bored with screwing them in jars to light  
my way to sleep, I showed my sister  
how to seize them by their heads and smear  
the miraculous light of their bodies  
like chalk luminescent on our driveway,  
just to see our names glowing on the ground.  
But by the time I reached my last letter  
the first had faded. I crushed another  
brittle pair of pixie wings, retracing  
what I thought was me. I remember  
their smell, sharp like warm rye bread,  
on my fingers, those lives  
still burning under my skin.

## Box Turtle

Water pooled in my shoes and in the curves of my ears, my shoulder aching from holding my bag off the sodden ground. When the bus arrived I tracked over other muddy footprints on the steps, plunked down my fare. And there was the turtle. It cowered under the seats behind the driver, and I sat a respectful few rows back. Whenever an oblivious set of feet tromped past it pulled its head in partway, but no one else noticed until they sat down. I heard the driver explain that he had rescued it from the road and would set it in the woods on his return route. He checked it over his shoulder at intersections. As I watched its slow turnings, something in my chest uncoiled and dissolved. Darts of orange spun off its shell plates, brightness for the first time in weeks. It looked at me once, or seemed to, with one hazel eye fixed on mine as if to say, well, what do you think?

## Papercut

You would not think such a thing  
has an edge until it cuts you.  
Books that I love, love me back  
with pages and corners bruised to velvet.  
Those that sit ignored on the shelf  
avenge themselves when I touch them,  
slicing the curve between thumb  
and forefinger, biting wherever they can.  
My own poems, printed on paper so new  
they do not know how to behave,  
cut me inside and out. Hush, I tell them.  
Give us time. We must wear down our edges,  
each to the other, before we can understand.

## Group Photo

None of us is really smiling; we were all far too clever for that. We lucky students, chosen to spend a weekend with three real poets, are all standing straight on the steps of some academic hall and trying to look as if we belong there. I am on the front row in my black dress. Of course, a black dress. Two rows behind me stands the poet who, after the flash, walked up behind me and ran his hand down my back, saying, "What I want is a picture of your back, with all that hair flowing down." He is not looking at my hair but at the camera in the picture I have hung above my desk. When he mailed me his book with an inscription I could not interpret, I felt his hand again, tracing the spill of hair down my back, writing on my spine.

## Kali of the Wiregrass

This place is dotted with barely-living landmarks, old men and women who tend their gardens or take short walks or sit and wave at cars. You see them from the corner of your eye; so when they go missing, it is easy not to notice. When my uncle the policeman arrived at the shabby pile of boards on an unnamed gravel road, the family let him in like a late party guest. He found her on a mattress in the back room, black and reeking with the skulls of kittens in her hair. They'd kept her hidden for the checks, he said; even while dead, she had kept them alive.

On my shelf I have a book filled with gods. Towards the back, past the stately Greeks and bearded Norse, I found Kali. Shiva sprawls like a bed beneath her dancing feet. Little corpses impale her ears, and little skulls garland her dark neck. I picture her bulging eyes and coiled tongue under the white sheet in the unfocused newspaper shot. Neglect and desperation made this poor old woman a goddess. All this time we had been praying for rain and for jobs. We did not know we were praying to her.

## **Panty Thief**

The math was wrong, for one thing. Ten days' laundry and only three pairs? All white? And nothing else gone? On the walk back to my apartment, I glared over my basket. All men were suspect. Which one had slipped into the laundry room and removed the still-damp twists from my dryer? I picture them laid out on a foreign bed. He fingers the silky black florals with lace around the waist. The generous cottons are thrown into a pile. He pulls the green bikinis over his hips, surprised, as I was, at how little fabric there really is. How exciting such a theft must be; they are his now as much as mine. We check our figure in the mirror, and both of us like what we see.

### **The Panty Thief in Jail**

Seeing him on television  
after the arrest,  
I couldn't help  
feeling sorry for him.  
In the mug shot  
his hair  
was a black tornado.  
One eye looked at the camera,  
the other  
at something I couldn't see.  
I doubt I would have looked better  
if everything  
I loved  
had been seized in an instant.  
The story showed police  
dumping  
a trash bag filled  
with women's underclothes,  
seven years of collecting,  
on the station floor,  
their rumpled colors  
a pile of butterfly wings.  
Some of them must be mine,  
plucked from my dryer  
months ago.  
Then I was angry  
at a fraternity prank.  
Now I admire  
his industry,  
his devotion,  
how much he must have loved his work.  
In a cell now,  
without colors or silks,  
he must dream of that  
treasure,  
those wings  
that took him  
where he hungered to be.

## Rain Dance

He sees me frowning at the miserable  
drip and drizzle outside our window.  
"Solar-powered girlfriend."

He doesn't understand how I love the rain!  
My heart quickens when the first missiles  
buffet the earth. I laugh at women  
sacrificing their books to save their hair.  
I tromp through puddles. When the wind  
drives the water under my umbrella,  
I open my mouth to drink it. I celebrate  
lightning, revel in hail.

Only the halfhearted, weak-willed damp  
gets me down. I know its potential  
for glory. When he catches me frowning,  
I'm saying to the clouds, Come on!  
We need something to make us dance!

## **The Ghost in Butler County Jail**

He haunted my family for years, though we didn't  
know that he was dead until his grave  
lay under seasons of grass. His unspoken name  
and blurred fleshy face harbored all our hate  
when we remembered him. I pictured him  
in starched gray coveralls, trudging lonely  
circles in the exercise yard.

In one hot hour I had learned to despise  
the man for whom I'd made a Christmas card  
every year, signing each with the sprawling word "love."  
We used to call him Granddaddy.  
Later, we didn't call him anything, unable to grant him  
even the small intimacy of a name.  
My grandmother, the woman he killed,  
was buried under her own name, my name, our name.

### She-Turtle's Grave

There is no deeper place than this  
black hole in the ocean bedrock.  
A swimmer here would never see  
these brown walls ridged like skin,  
the dunes of treacherous silt,  
the chink in the rock though which  
he entered. If a diver came with  
his halogen light, he might find  
a hollow carapace half-filled  
with drowned and broken eggs.  
They list as if made of sand,  
the turtle hues taken by the ocean  
and replaced with this dun. Buried deep  
under ocean, under rock, crumpled and  
snug on their bed of silt, the ghosts  
of hatchlings drift like smoke,  
their eyes unopened, ignorant of sky.

## Chocolate Muse

Fudgy cookies, caramel brownies, cheesecakes  
laced with liqueurs and secrets were the tools  
of my sweet seduction. But that poet, skinny  
as a drinking straw, never ate a bite.  
He wrapped up a bit politely "for later,"  
mumbling about late feeding habits, and sipped  
a Diet Coke. Frustrated in my kitchen, I deduced  
he must keep a sweet-toothed muse in a pearl-inlaid box,  
feeding it what he denied himself in exchange  
for words. It did not seem like such a bad  
arrangement, after all. And if I were feeding  
poetry instead of my friend, what of it?  
I stock my larder with brown sugar and marzipan,  
searching for new recipes to warm the page.

### On Purchasing Modern Brides Magazine

Four ninety-five will buy everything--  
Your Perfect Dress, Wedding Beauty Tips,  
The Etiquette of Money, even  
Wedding-Night Sex: Magic or Myth?  
The models in white look young enough  
to get the bridegroom arrested. What about  
Veils That Won't Make You Look Like a Fountain?  
How to Decide Who's Responsible  
for Coffee? Ten Easy Ways to Forgive Him  
For Leaving the Stove On Overnight, Again?  
When I recycle this book, the machines  
will grind and regrind the pages  
until the words come out right, or blank,  
and force us to look our love in the eye.

## Visiting Writer, Inner City School

My smile tightened as the buzzer sounded  
and the teacher locked the classroom door.  
I was the only white person, come to teach  
these high school students about the poetry  
in themselves. Their eyes told me they already knew  
how futile this would be. Only half  
took my handouts. A few on the front rows  
responded to my questions, asked their own.  
Some slept. Most conversed among themselves  
in unfamiliar rhythms.

Bessie Harvey, the black artist of tree stumps,  
paint and beads, would have known how to reach them.  
Passing out pictures of her sculptures,  
I could tell them nothing. Who was I to teach them  
what it is to be black and poor in Tennessee,  
how to use that in art or poetry or music;  
what did I know of the beat of African drums?

Months later, in the museum cool,  
I see that none of the halfhearted verses  
those students composed have been displayed  
among Bessie's creations. Small wonder  
they never revised as I asked and submitted  
their works. At my back is a wooden devil,  
grinning at me from a bone-white face.

## Flute

You were my first kiss  
in high school,  
the long silver love  
of my bright afternoons.  
It took months  
to adjust my lips  
to you,  
the curve of the metal,  
the hold of the jaw,  
the airy pucker.  
Finally  
we made music,  
Souza and big band,  
Beatles medleys  
and the football fight song.  
When my mother  
sold you last year,  
I felt a longing  
I didn't deserve,  
so long after my lips  
had lost your shape  
and taste.

**American Candy**  
(for Emma)

They've disappeared from drug and grocery stores,  
died out from movie counters,  
never made it to vending machines.  
Only gas stations off rural interstates  
with rusty pumps and Lotto counters  
still bare the full array.  
I had to explain a Clark Bar  
to my British friend after she saw the name  
in a poem. I want to take her south  
to a cinderblock store beside a fireworks stand.  
I want to lead her back to the double rows  
where I meditated on every childhood road trip,  
pondering the names—Lemon Heads, Hot Tamales,  
Oh Henry, Charleston Chew,  
Sugar Daddy, Zagnut and Zero—  
the first music I learned.  
We can eat ourselves sick where we stand,  
chewing on the past until our jaws ache.

## Carcass

The shape that I took for a castoff  
tire tread focused into a black dog,  
head twisted toward me as I drove past.  
Saturday morning shone bright over  
the Lurleen Wallace Bridge spanning  
the river between home and work. Today  
was work. And here was this dog.

I knew without checking the mirror  
that my cheeks were flushed, bloody with knowing  
that it could have been me who was driving  
too fast or didn't bother to swerve.  
I know only from dreams the voiceless thump  
of a body under wheels; yet every death  
in the road or newspaper or even my plate  
brings the blood to my face. How do I know  
which guilt to hold on to? How long is long enough  
to feel bad for a dog, another dead mutt,  
on the side of the highway, another mess  
for the city to clear away?  
It is two years later. Here is this poem.

### **My mother made bagels**

every winter, reserving entire days  
for the ritual of measuring, mixing,  
kneading, waiting for the dough to rise,  
rolling soft ropes with rough-knuckled hands  
that look like mine, sealing the pinched ends  
with a wet fingertip, letting rise again  
and patiently boiling, careful not to overcrowd  
the pot, draining on clean towels before  
giving me a bowl of egg yolk and water  
to brush on and a handful of sesame seeds  
or black poppy to sprinkle like rain.  
When the smell filled the house  
we slipped the first batch out of the oven  
shared the first one, hot and plain, seeds sticking  
to our chins, laughing as our fingers burned.  
I have made them by myself only once,  
snowed in with nothing to do but bake;  
but even then I could not wait to taste them cool,  
and tore the steaming gold in two, eating only half.

## Monday, Waiting

In a Birmingham hospital bed my grandfather's body  
labors against Saturday's heart attack.  
My father sits at his bedside. In Knoxville,  
I am ashamed to catch myself wondering  
which day for the funeral will be least  
inconvenient. I have a sort of habitual love  
for the man with a fourth-grade education  
who misspelled my name on every card or gift  
he ever gave me, who sealed mine and my sister's  
birthday cards in each other's envelopes,  
but lately has been sending short, painful letters  
with money orders enclosed. He knew this was coming,  
and wanted to make sure I would miss him.

But he did send those cards and gifts and letters,  
knowing that the words were wrong, knowing  
that I would know. I once watched him grip a pen  
as if trying to prevent its escape, dragging  
it over paper without flexing his raw knuckles.  
Words were enemies he was willing to lose to  
for the sake of love, the one word he could always spell.

## Trails

I almost missed it: the wild flash  
of a deer's back as it bolted  
from its hiding place beside the trail.  
I thought, that will teach me to be talking  
instead of looking in such a place.

Like when I was a child camping  
on Mount Cheaha, and followed a fawn  
to a grassless circle where it lay  
beside a dozen others, watching me.  
She's all right, they told each other,  
she is a deer, too. I cannot be sure now  
that this was not a dream, but since then  
I have been a deer.

## Shelf Space

At the rummage sale Saturday I bought another bookshelf, the third since our move, now the eighth in the apartment. This does not include the broken-down entertainment center we rescued from beside the dumpster.

"It will hold books," we declared before dragging it home. What will not hold books in times of need? Milk crates, boxes, the spaces between table legs; the books hold each other in makeshift spaces, as he and I try to do, to make ourselves fit into the spaces we have built.

## Lesson

I am learning sign from the deaf boy  
who works with me in the mall cafeteria,  
he in the dishroom, I at the register.  
Tonight as the clock neared eight, he urged  
the manager to lock up early, and so  
taught me a new one, "close."  
He held his arms out in front of his body, palms up,  
as if waiting to receive something heavy;  
then his hands arched upward and together  
like a sketch of birds' wings, turning  
knuckle to knuckle at their apex, resting  
level with his breastbone: close.

I don't know if the same sign could be used  
for the adjective "closed," but I think of  
my grandmother now as I didn't see her then.  
The bullets her husband put in her face  
forced the sealed coffin at her funeral,  
and I had to imagine her through the wood.  
When we found out her killer and husband  
had died in prison, my mother said "Thank God,"  
and I didn't say anything. Now my hands  
make two arches, come together, and rest.

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## Vita

Juliana Gray was born in Selma, Alabama on January 27, 1972, and moved to Anniston, Alabama in 1978. There she attended public elementary schools and graduated from Oxford High School in May 1990. She attended the University of Alabama, where she received a Bachelor of Arts in English degree with minors in history and creative writing, from August 1990 to May 1994. She entered the Master's program in English with Writing Concentration at the University of Tennessee Knoxville in August 1995, and will receive her degree in May 1997.

Her poems have been published in Limestone and All Around Us: Poems From the Valley. She has worked as a Writer in Residence at Sequoyah Elementary School and Austin-East High School in Knoxville, Tennessee.

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