

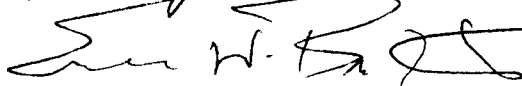
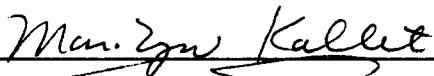
To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Stacy Jones Waller entitled "Rivers of Urgent Breath." 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

RIVERS OF URGENT BREATH

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Stacy Jones Waller

December, 1998

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For Mike, my encourager

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ABSTRACT

It is my sincere desire that in writing these poems I have learned how better to hone the poetic voice, the speaking of the muse—or muses—without whom we as artists would have no function. I think one thing that characterizes the poems in this book is an attention to sensual details, which, to me, are inextricably connected to who we are as humans. In essence, the spirit records experience through the details of the body's interactions. Hot rain puddling in the summer dirt, for instance, may transport us back to the occasion of that sense, as it did for me in the poem "Blues," and call forth a similar emotional response. However, on a larger scale, what I experienced in the writing of these poems was a quest for newness, for reinvention—in relationships, in language, in the poems themselves. Whether I attained that quest or not, I hope that visible in the poems is the energy and passion involved in the writing process.

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INTRODUCTION

Driving from home to Knoxville on the interstate, I lose myself in the music of Billie Holiday, Muddy Waters, Miles Davis, Albert Collins. For over six years now I have been drawn to blues music and to jazz for at least four. I think that all my life I have been a poet, whether or not I had realized it earlier. For some time I have been interested in the connections between jazz, blues, and poetry, in both form and content. These art forms have much to say about each other. First, there is the obvious connection: poetry is music. But what beyond that? Well, blues came out of pain, emerged as songs to sing for healing, for freedom. Much of blues music, like Native American tribal poetry, is incantatory, with its rhythmic repetition and powerful call-and-response sequences. The art of jazz, like blues, is emotion made physical. Its power seems to depend on varying the rhythm, creating a sense of movement away from repetition, "hungering," as poet Robert Hass says, for that next note. Exactly, then, what are the distinctions to be made from blues, poetry, and jazz? Despite differences, they are all-consuming art forms: powerful, spellbinding, entrancing forms, whether they use the power of words, music, or both.

When I read the poems of Yusef Komunyakaa, I became more aware of the connection of poetry and music, particularly that of jazz and blues. Although not rigidly a "jazz poet" in subject matter, Komunyakaa often has undertones of jazz and blues running beneath his poems. For instance, in "Venus's Flytraps," the speaker is a five year old boy just learning that more often than not what matters in the world is what is not said, that there is a private life of silent or quiet assertion.

Komunyakaa says the poem came out of an emotional response elicited from his hearing the trumpet of Louis Armstrong and allowing those sounds to take him back to when he was five years old. What emerges is a tight but syncopated rhythm. Komunyakaa says in an interview in *Ploughshares* that “oral language is our first music, and the body is an amplifier.” And we see in his poetry that the inevitable result is a mix that is physical, musical, and lexical, all inextricably connected.

Learning the complexities of the rhythms of poetry—how form and content connect to forge a whole—is an interesting landscape for me. I suppose that, as it is with most younger poets, my focus has centered largely on content or subject rather than on form—until I read some of Robert Hass’s poems and essays. According to Hass, “There is a sense in which poetry is not so much the writing of words as it is the movement of breath itself.” In the essay “Listening and Making” from *Twentieth Century Pleasures*, Hass describes how rhythm is integral to the everydayness of experience, from walking down the sidewalk, to the movements of lovemaking, to our very heartbeats. We *live* rhythm, whether we are conscious of it or not.

Poetry is also therapeutic. Hass addresses this idea in his poem “Faint Music” from *Sun Under Wood*: “I had the idea that the world’s so full of pain / it must sometimes make a kind of singing.” Poetry becomes this singing, a way to weave out of language a way of making meaning from experience. This making of meaning is often healing because when we look closely at our experiences, we find out more about who we really are. As we see in the work of poets such as Hass and Jack Gilbert, both of whom rejoice in the wonder of everyday life, it is only when we feel we are alive that we can be fully alive. As Gilbert points out in his poem

“Highlights and Interstices,” the few moments we choose to remember as important in our lives—marriages, graduations, and deaths—are connected by the everyday, commonplace experiences, such as the breakfasts Gilbert’s speaker recalls having eaten with his late wife. It is left to each person to decide to search for value in the seemingly mundane.

It is that same issue—of experience in the fullest possible way—that seems to be an essential force for the French poet Rimbaud and the German poet Rilke. Upon reading poems of the two writers, I searched for similarities between their work, and at first thought the link might be something akin to the theme of Horace’s “carpe diem,” and perhaps it is this and much more. Both of these poets seem, like Keats, to be in a quest for the truest possible vision of experience. They appear to begin with a fascination with and appreciation for language and the sensual. Rilke searches for and, I believe, reaches this vision of authenticity in *The Sonnets to Orpheus*. His poems are charged with the ephemeral that comprises daily life. In Part I, Sonnet XV begins: “Wait..., that tastes good... But already it’s gone.” Here, it is the taste of the orange that Rilke speaks of, but we see this same notion throughout the rest of the poems. Stephen Mitchell, who translated Rilke in a 1985 edition of *Sonnets*, writes in the introduction:

The taste of an apple, a horse galloping across a meadow, a flower opening at dawn—all are so intensely present in their ephemeral beauty that outer turns into inner, sense into spirit. Orpheus’ transfigured body is a return to the simplest human experiences of seeing and breathing, beyond thought: the huge, vibrant, dangerous world that every child lives in.

An earlier poet, Arthur Rimbaud, who strictly adhered to structure and form in much of his earlier works, seems to veer from that form in his later prose piece *Une Saison en Enfer* (*A Season In Hell*). Although quite abstruse and disjointed, Rimbaud's still brilliantly rich epic *Season* seems to be a culmination of his life's work: his irreconcilable vision of Christianity and his quest to see the world again with a new, wondrous, almost childlike fascination. In the section titled "Morning," he says, "I can no more explain myself than the beggar with his endless *Paters* and *Ave Marias*. *I have forgotten how to speak!*" Similar to Rilke, Rimbaud is also searching for that new vision of the world, of language, of the poem itself.

Consequently, it seems the pattern that emerges among my other influences is a rich tapestry of the sensual, of the risk-takers who are willing to confront the mystery outright. I witnessed early how to work within the metaphor through the poems of writers such as James Dickey and Louise Glück. Lyric poet Glück explores something of the same issues as Rilke and Rimbaud. In her poem "Nostos" from *Meadowlands*, Glück questions the faculty of memory, discovering that, in the end, "we look at the world once, in childhood. / The rest is memory." The work of Hass and Komunyakaa introduced me to risk-taking, particularly in form, how form can transform the poem. In James Wright, I observed a fierceness of respect for the mystery of things and an openness for aesthetics, as we see in the poem "Beautiful Ohio." However, one of the most influential, vibrant voices in my career has been Lucille Clifton. Her poetry is the work of more than just a survivor—a celebrant—at times with tenderness and, at others, with a defiance.

Clifton once said that "poems are about questions, not about

answers. When you write poems you try to figure out something you don't know." Often it is difficult when the poet has received that seed of inspiration, that word or line or image, to allow the poem to develop on its own. I sometimes want to force it, to frame it. But allowing the poem to emerge on its own is part of the figuring out what you don't know. Otherwise, there is no discovery or insight, and no reason for writing poetry.

Poetry, as I noted, evolves from a sensibility of the heart, of being alive and realizing it. Of course, to be alive and to be human means the experience of both pain and joy. Keats refers to this idea in his letters when he writes of the human experience as a "vale of soul-making." He speaks of suffering as necessary to joy and celebration, and the way in which poetry reconciles these emotions, leading to consciousness and awareness of the self. Similarly but less philosophically, James Wright's poem "Well, What Are You Going to Do?" vividly illustrates this insight. The poem begins with that lingering question for its title, and by the end, after the speaker has been in the midst of that everyday, yet miraculous birth experience, he answers his question: "Be kind? Kill? Die?" Yes, we will do a bit of all three.

For me a crucial part of poetry (and blues and jazz) is the reconciliation of these opposites, this essential part of being human, the sometimes brokenness and the joy and realization which follows. In my own beginnings as a poet, I know there is much out there to be learned, and, perhaps more importantly, as Keats noted, to be *felt*. But I know the experience only comes through diligence in listening to the poetic voice and self-sacrifice. I look to the stories of pioneer bluesman Robert Johnson, who supposedly went to the crossroads and sold his soul to the

devil to play guitar, and poet Sharon Olds, who offered everything she had ever learned to the devil in exchange for the ability to write good poetry. These stories suggest, perhaps, that to play blues or write poetry the artist, first, needs a little skill, and will still have to do some creative bargaining—self-sacrifice—in the process.

Blackberry Winter

When I recall you,
a boy of four, reaching
to the thorny vine
laden with the ripe prize,
I sense no guilt in your chewing,
mouth crammed full of berries,
overflowing with juice.

I let you feed me,
hoping my parents
wouldn't catch us,
knowing the stains
would give us away.

You were the one
who took risks.

I am still learning
what it means
to please the mouth.

Ouija

Fingers gritted to the oracle,
Susan and I find ourselves evoking language
from those grown silent in childhood—
lost in that world of buried parents,
grandparents, brothers, sisters.
We know that surely there is more to it
than the simple yes/no of things.
We find ourselves pushing
to take the message we want
out of the cardboard, comforted
by the creation of our own words,
carving our own visions, although
we won't admit it, to fill
empty spaces left in our lives.

Alone

He hinders sleep, calling and calling.
If I could, I would drop the fluttering body
of the cricket into the furnace lit for him
in the middle of July.
But he hears me coming—
my feet on the floorboards,
a hand pressed to the pale wall—
and is silent
with bugs who scurry in darkness
over veins of wires behind the walls.
Each night I lie here
drenched in the gnawing hum of silence
until he begins.
Outside I hear the night:
alive with legs and mouths.

Music for a Brother

What is it like to be born?

I was born in a Memphis hospital near the river, and I want to believe that the sun was fading through the clouds that afternoon, pinks, reds, and oranges in a sky-fire behind the river before night full with stars moved in. I want to believe that I was there before I entered the world.

Where was love born?

I like to think love came out of the ocean—out of the blue-green waters brimming with life and, incessant with longing, blossomed into a starfish with the August tides.

November, month of my birth, and I am ten—the smart, quiet one,
desperate to belong.

I am dreaming myself out of class, home to the bicycle my father
put together the day before

from old scraps, the pink, patchy-rusted remains of someone else's moving
out of childhood.

My father and mother are burning leaves, and I am riding my bicycle
toward the corners of earth.

So far that no one but me exists: I look back and cannot see them.
I am afraid.

My brother appears and says, "Go on. Go on." I pedal harder
until he, too, is gone.

The earth pulses in my throat.

Warm scent of gladiolus.
Mimosa, pinked in the air,
planting itself where it will.

Childhood.
A thing not easy
to be born out of.

Wednesday, sun so bright it could have burst. Dizzy with being eighteen
and nine days from graduation, I went to my job inserting newspapers at
the county weekly, the crisp smell of ink hanging in the gray air. My boyfriend
of a year came to tell me my father was dead. I did not know what to feel,
standing in front of the paper office, the May sun hot like forged metal, life

brimming around me.

We drove to the hospital to find that my father wasn't there. We found them all at my house—those eyes of our neighbors that had transplanted themselves into our grief. My brother told me our father lay dead at the end of his garden, hands coated with the earth of mulching tomatoes, his face gray like my inked hands. After fourteen years of heart disease my father was dead. My mother was glassed in stupor. How easily the heart implodes.

The blood flows brother & sister through our veins.
When I was four and our father was in the hospital,
you bathed me, fed me, loved me,
gave me a part of my life.
You slept beside me when I was afraid of being alone in the dark.
(I am still afraid of being alone in the dark.)

You know my life came after yours—a collection of postage stamps, hot afternoon naps still wet from the sprinkler, tumbling in the summer grass with the taste of watermelon dangling from the tongue.

I know your life—piano music then, organ music now. My life would have been soundless, empty, had you not put music into those piano keys, made those organ pipes live.

I have known for some time
that you loved men.
When you called last night,
with tears stifling the words,
you told me, the first in our family.
I say the worst thing
is that you might be moving away.

When I woke this morning, I felt sorry for our mother,
who quit the eighth grade to marry,
who let our father think for her.
Now that he is gone,
I mourn part of her, too.

I want to hold you and our mother—
you with both lives for thirty-five years
and her with piety choking her heart like weeds.
I want to say
it is wonderful to be born.

The Mathematician's Wife

Go ahead, calculate me in exact figures,
so I never have to wonder

if I measure up. Yes, reassure me,
I am the hypotenuse of your triangle.

Even if I don't get all of the dust
behind the bed, no matter,

the cushions in our house are still
divisible by two. When I am

with pot roast and laundry, you sit
at your desk, numbers behind your eyes,

and say with compass in hand you
are able to think of us, of the circle

we make and how it has no ending.

Sometimes After Getting

How do I return from having to wanting?

I pray like a knuckled monk beside the bed
to be transported from contentment back to desire.

Getting is what I dream of and the loss I face.

To be transported from contentment to desire.

How do I return from having to wanting?

Wildness

I feel you, bone-dry,
a wolf pacing
at my stoop,
and I know how you have
hungered for me
in the desert of your longing.

Lying here
in the middle of autumn,
porchlight streaming through the window,
I have decided to make it summer again,
to live among tumbleweed
and wolves.

I tell you this:
I have slept with foxes,
found them, after all, to be
scheming. Tonight I will dance
into the storm,
grapple with slick backfur,
nestle against
oak bark running black
with rain.

A Memory of Waking

He slides out of my dream, half-finished,
leaves me reaching, a ripe peach on the first leg
of being devoured, teeth moving toward the bite.
Dark-haired, he is my Sunday school teacher,

who floats above me in my dream.
Here in early light, he is almost
available, warm beside me,
voice discernible through darkness.

For moments I live in this place,
confused by morning, delicate rays
of bees outside the window, swarms
of sunlight flooding the room.

something, bessie

after folk art by bessie harvey

something in this
wants to move.
something dances
on the cliff of living.
something gnarled,
not broken,
wants to ascend from trees.
something black
as the belly of africa
says take up your mooses stick,
girl, and fly.
everything in you,
bessie, wants to be wood
born from earth.

Release

my lover is waiting
open-mouthed
in the clearing.
he swallows me
like olives
and we fall beside each other,
cold-boned.

after resting
we let go of everything—
piss
against the blackjack tree,
hiss hot
into the moss.

The Wine of Poetry

It would have to be

Muscadine—

Liquid on the lips,

The way it rolls,

Off the tongue,

Drunk on letters making words

Into sounds.

Language, too,

Is pre-memory.

The cacophony, harmony,

Primal lovemaking.

Blues

You left in rain that spider-webbed
the yearning dust of a hot afternoon.

I sat out in the storm
and smelled that sleepy wail

of train engine behind the house.
My feet heard the locomotive rumble of steel

against steel, tasted train wheels pressed
to tracks made hot electric metal.

I counted empty boxcars where cargo
should have been, tried to imagine

the red caboose a different color.
I read later the track of red lipstick

on your jaw. The rumble of your mouth
not moving spoke miles to me.

remodeling

howling wolf is playing
in the living room
and we're drilling
into the rotting wall.
everything's shaking,
vibrating—
even the light fixture
on the bedroom ceiling.
we've been working all night,
whitewashing
dark spots that would not
come clean.

Close

Because the mind is comfortable
in its record of things,
I reach for the smell of your skin,
the warmth of your chest against
a shoulder I have failed to cover.

Stomach to stomach:

I could die like this.

I want you to be soft.

Is it too much?

I want you sometimes
just to whisper.

Ram Tough

*With 190 horsepower, there's a reason
we put Scotchguard on the seats.*

—Chevy truck advertisement

“Baby, I’ll take you for a ride
you’ll never forget,”
says Kenny, the football player
who thinks he’s got her number.
The very idea of it
seems comical to her—
a truck with animalike ferocity,
with enough horsepower
to make her wet her pants.
How could she forget a ride like that?
The sensuality of soaked jeans,
the vibration of vinyl,
the roar of maleness
enclosing her. She agrees to the offer,
more beast than she knows.

lover

when you strut
down the street
you are a clock
tick-tocking me.

you are liquid jazz
on my tongue.

i am everywhere,
nowhere.

i am in your cosmos—
your moon,
watching you
under many stars.

Gifts

i.

"This year we're going artificial,"
Mom says, giving her attention
to the vegetable soup on the stove.
Sacrilege, I murmur.
Each year until this one, until he died,
my father and I bundled up,
crunched across leaves
to cut the tree that would grace our living room.
The smell of cedar, fruit, candy
hanging in the darkness, in the glitter
of multicolored lights.
This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine.
We tried to understand each other
as best we could.
My father, the deacon,
the husband, the lover,
the father.
What did I know of gifts?

ii.

Sometimes I speculate whether Jesus
would have had a Christmas tree.
I'm sure there was barely room

in that cramped Nazarene house.
He would have been too modest
to celebrate his own birthday—
nothing self-righteous
about that son of a carpenter.
But Christmas with the Christs?
What a concept. Out of eggnog?
Holy holiday! They only need water
and that living, breathing messiah
to perform their miracles.

iii.

On Christmas Eve, I dream of Santa
sliding down my chimney,
covered in soot, naked without his red suit.
I welcome him into chilled arms—
naked myself, waiting for him to come.
I sit on his lap and make love to him,
calling out one of his many names:
“Kris Kringle, Kris Kringle,
you’re the best lover I ever had.”
With a smirk, he asks me
if I’ve been a good girl,
and I tell him no,
I have been bad.
I have been very bad.

The Trestle

Knee deep in sagegrass,
my father carried me on his back.
We came to the railroad,
removed our shoes, rolled up pantslegs,

and waded the March water
of the creek. It must have been
cool then, but we were too busy
watching the world unfold itself

to us, spring blooming into summer.
We climbed the hill to the tracks,
my father catching me when I fell
into a thorn thicket. He wiped away

the tears and blood of what seemed to me
a deep wound. When the sun faded,
he carried me home, the way I later
carried him out of this life.

Early Spring

Wild onions sprinkle the air
from someone's freshly cut grass

and you are driving your blue van
into the distance.

The wind moves across my arms—
a presence taking place of your absence.

Twilight opens itself to me:
streetlights humming

and bodies stirring through the yellow
light of windows.

The porch swing squeaks;
you will be home Friday.

With you, the calmness of childhood—
cold clover at dusk.

It is quiet here, cool this night
as I feel close to you far away.

His Youngest Daughter

To him I must never have seemed any older
than I was nights when I slept on his bare chest
as we breathed in the shoe factory leather
in his hair and the smoke of King Edward cigars.
I thought he puppeteered the black night.

Now on this anniversary of his dying,
he seems no younger to me than he was four years ago.
After reading of the death of one of his friends,
I thought for an instant I would tell him over
dinner, the way we always discussed things.

Then I remembered the feel of his hand
soft on his chest in the casket—cold
like morning honeysuckle.
He speaks to me sometimes from old Fords,
from the quiet summer wind.

Remains

We watched the house go like anyone would,
paper and wood blaze to smoke and ember.

We saw its doors and windows scream
like the mouth of a dying cave.

We had put so much into the making
and none into the going.

I think of it now,
how we sifted through charred photographs,
the smoke on our hands.

Lonely

Three days he was my housemate,
that black bug skimming the carpet,
flitting floor to ceiling while I
watched television, ate dinner.

My lover gone away,
leaving nothing but me
and the quiet.

The third night, I heard
the click in the halogen lamp,
saw the smoke rising as if from
a magician's act, the body
already disappearing.

I had to see.

Blacker still, he lay silenced
in the rim, legs wired and dangling.
He lingered in the air for days.

Going On

No one ever looks the same
in two photographs. First,
more hair; later, the strained lines
under the eyes, the eyes themselves
yearning. *Yes, Jesus, the spirit
is willing, but the flesh is weak.*
I remember the last time
I saw my father living. Late again
for school, I went back inside
that August house to get my hairbrush
and he was sitting in the recliner,
his moon face stretched from years
of heart pain, years of cutting soles
for shoes. Notches on the face to tell
the numbers. We imagine
at different stages how we will look later.
That's how it is, always moving.

Loving

"I will drink of you like milk,
ivory and sweet,"
he crooned to me.

But we knew that everything
that sounds good
isn't always so.

Through the light rays spilling
into the morning motel,
we both saw the lies.

We knew we couldn't love
as if there were no tomorrow,
so we loved as if there were no yesterday.

Camping a Few Miles from Home

You open me with your kiss,
and the dock, sliced by shadows,
becomes darkness and water.
Walking back to camp,
I am inside out,
would like to save eyes, ears,
everything that feels,
in our picnic basket for record.
Can we remember love
on nights when our tongues, hearts
are silenced by silver blades
of meaninglessness?
On this night
I lie down to you, flesh,
and cotton sheets, the deer
making love in late summer.

Junior High

to Randy

A black jeep like yours
passes me on the interstate,
and I am thirteen
again and in your class.

We wanted your closeness,
wanted to know the secrets
your twentysomething body
promised us.

What I couldn't know was that you wanted
our world as much as we did yours:
memorizing our language, listening
to our music, trying to enter—reenter.

There are things I, too, miss.

I saved the ribbon you gave me
for winning the class spelling bee
that October afternoon, pressed it into
a catalog, but the colors have faded.

Saturday Morning

Waking

in the afterbirth of light,

I listen to you

breathe the rhythm of sleep.

I would know you were here

even if I did not know you were here:

aftershave, soap, pheromones.

Sometimes when you are gone

I steal pieces of you from the smell of your closet.

I realize in the night I have thrown off

the extra quilt covering me and suddenly—

emptiness—the feeling of you

saying you do not want children.

Sometimes I wonder how anyone loves.

Giving

for Marilyn

We are grocery shopping
in the desert of the unwanted
when she turns to me,
parting those wine-red lips,
you know i'm an indian princess
spinning a knowing glance at me

I turn away, rapt in the glowing mango;
she pulls me back
with her words
my lover is a cactus;
you could come home (come home)
with me to meet him

I reach for the mango,
placing it at the end
of the cart. She moves
the mango closer to her own,
smiling as if to say
here, put it with mine;
it's on me
this time

Getting It Down

Because I tell him
that poems come to me
in a flood, a hurricane of lines,
my husband tells me I need
a microcassette recorder
to get down the words.
I feel uncomfortable, I say,
speaking into a machine
when I have hands and paper.
You talk to answering machines,
he says. So I relent.
There it is—my voice, on record.
I speak to it.
It speaks back to me.

Invocation

Abandon yourself,
Stacy, in the middle of the day
and agree to be naked

until night hangs
with possibility.

There are poems, subtle

as starfish, wanting
to be born from a dark sky.

Devour their sounds,

the juice trickling
down your arms,
down legs, soaking

into thick rich mud
between the toes.

mary

look at her:

born into birthing, untouched
by any man, a vessel of something
higher, unknown to other women.

look at her:

giving blood to something pure,
feeling the thing kicking from within,
knowing only half its face.

look at her:

chosen without choice,
dying into it.
born into its death.

The Remembrance of Cod

The forsythia is growing again
by the house where I used to visit Beth.
Our dusks were basketball and fried fish,
all that I knew of the place then.

She didn't meet the bus one morning
when it chugged up the hill in fog.

Later she told me of wearing gloves to school
on warm days because he had shoved
her hands in the hot ashes of the fireplace,
Her stepfather was all eyes and veins,
she said, always hiding
his animal soul
behind that face of beard.
Sleep in that house could have been
a death knell because his eyes,
hollow and hard,
were poised like knives
at the young flesh of our backs.

Driving by the house years later
there is only the dimness of candlelight
by which we ate one night
when her stepfather was away.

Fear comes to me in a dream

It is Friday at Aunt Louise's in Mobile,
the stiff white house I once pretended
was a plantation, magnolias
overhanging the driveway.

I am on the grand tour
for the first time.

At the end of a hallway,
a maimed fox writhes—
split from neck to stomach—
on top of a portable Zenith.

Some rooms are cold and blue,
partitioned by blankets hanging
like ghosts over wires;
others filled with smoke.

We return to the dim hallway
to find the fox gone.

Who did this to you, fox?

I hope it wasn't me.

My Grandmother Undressing

As a child I did not want to see them hanging,
the two bottle-capped moons
outlined by red strap markings
as she changed into her ruffled nightgown.
I did not want to see the belly button
hidden in bloating and the scars
of seven children who passed through her—
my father one of them.

I loved her, but not when she was naked.
I remember her back humped,
a turtle carrying its shell
like the weight of the world.
What I could not have imagined then
(boy-chested, skinny) was that we
were already each other.

And now that she has died, slipped out
of the marked body, I am witness
to my own body, the slow scourges
of reality and gravity
becoming my own dying self.

River

Nothing in this night
but cold river,

and earth so deep
you cannot say sky

without saying river;
nothing

between them.

I come to the bridge,

welcome its green steel.

I stand on the edge,

knowing I might plunge at any time,
my feet begging for air.

Discovering

i. fire

They say the next time

God will destroy the earth with fire.

Driving east on I-40 in noon sunlight,

I find the bridge smoldering into lava,
everyone taken in the rapture but me.

I fear I am lost.

Again, the Hell from the third grade

Sunday school movie and the smell
of ash hot on my palms.

ii. earth

One hundred miles from the fault line our earth cracked into hard July
every summer when rains

forgot to come. Wanting to press my hand into the gash in the ground
behind the pump house,

I imagined turning my backyard inside out, sucked into that world

I knew

must live there. A forked tongue peered back at me from the soft insides
of its home.

iii. water

She always claimed the ocean as her parents. Why then, when he honey-
moonied her at the beach was she terrified to walk into the moonlit water
where everything is a gift for touch? He held out to her, parent waiting for
child's steps, Jesus calling to Peter to drop everything except faith. Some-
thing in the deep kept her back—saltwater only to her ankles but sharks
skimming waves until water and sky wove into blackness.

iv. air

when the chimera arrives

i hover near treetops,

above his half serpent body

slinking beneath the sidewalk,

beneath burnished leaves.

he rises to meet me, gold as apollo,

blue eyes blazing.

not afraid of falling?

no, i say, last night i flew over

a summer pond alongside Walt Whitman.

i move closer to the chimera,

serpent's breath on my face—

craving decadence in this life, I say

no fear, just

hunger for falling.

Wake of the Storm

At ten o'clock, wind whines through cypresses in the sideyard and
thunder drums the earth into evening.

The gods must be writing poems.

In sixth grade, Kim Smith, a Church of Christ girl, jumped out of her
chair after a thunderclap and exclaimed, "Shit!"

Later, humor, the irony of creation, resonated in that event—the storm as
divine release, Kim's excremental response, and now the
channeling of it into a poem.

Somewhere a girl is looking into the storm from a window, needing it,
welcoming lightning. She is happiest, most terrified, when
the sky is nothing but energy, a single jagged line from earth
to sky.

A Place to Begin

On the edge of calling you when I cannot,
again, dial the number. I pass evenings
listening to spiders weave tapestries in mid-air,
thinking I will drive by your house, knowing
it is better not to. I settle for sleep, dream I am
climbing mimosas, reaching for the nectar
of honeysuckle vine entangled around limbs,
always out of reach. I wake in silence broken
by the murmur of rain. I know the dream
I want to dream. It is dark, except for slivers
of light impaling the floor, and you sing to me
in a low voice, our bodies immersed
in the silkiness of bathwater. I am calmed
to sleep by your singing, you hushed
by the calmness of my breathing. Nights pass
like this. Where to enter? I have looked for it
in deep places in the earth, the way
a child sifts through the earth for hours
searching for who lives on the other side.

This Is How

So how is this, Donald, when

I beg the gods to take desire from me,

I desire you, nonetheless.

Nights I whisper your name to the wind

to be carried to the sand, to be washed

into the tide, but wind refuses me,

and the moon stares, a pitiless undying

mother, into the face of my longing.

Surely you cannot go on like this forever,

letting me into the silk of your

flesh only in dreams; you must

know that, like Eros, this

is the body's way of breaking into the psyche.

Come now, let's eat apples under

the cottonwood tree, spoon

the milk of music into

one another's mouths.

You must know that I will be

gentle with you, gentle and soft

as a lynx when she is about to

devour that which she

most desires.

The Genesis of Desire

We will take the afternoon train
away from the city into the calm,
you think, but into the desperate quiet
of chaos, I say, because we will
be together and nothing is calm
when we are together.

Otherwise, that is how I want it.

How you hold me to you.

As if I were stars in your pocket.

Not quite that way because

you say you want us free.

And we are free. For many afternoons

there are deer smiling around us

and laughter of clouds that only

we feel. The heartbeat of the earth.

This is the second coming. This

is the first. And what do I say

of it? What is it that I know?

Nothing. I know nothing

but you, and you and stars

and night about us.

Everything is dancing and I feel it
in the pulse of myself when you move
here with me in this rhythm
and cannot stand the beating of my heart
and the eyes ripe in midday heat.
Haven't we been here before? The times
you played hide-and-seek with your cousin beneath
the tomato plants? The salt in your mouth
and on your shoulders, your neck, your back,
the grass rising into your stomach, your teeth?
Can you feel the tumult of the earth all over again,
the recklessness of your hips against mine
and the whispered quatrain of you—
yes, yes, yes...

How do I say this?
I want to hold you in jasmine and moonlight
beneath the weeping willow tree,
want to feel the curve of your hipbone
against mine, nestled.
The way you look inside me—
I don't know how to go on.
I will kiss the pink of your fingertips,
torture you with kisses.
Is it wrong to love only the body?

You've discovered me, unlocking my secrets,
indulging,
forgetting your past lovers, remembering
only me, my skin hot, your skin hot,
the way you've always remembered it.

Bathsheba Dispels Her Love for David

I know the heart is not a moon,
does not revolve, is greater.

I write love as the sun
burning for many.

That is why on that June afternoon,
naked to the knuckle, I bathed
for you. There you were on your roof,
as needy of the apple as I was.
You partook, devoured, attested
that you could not live by vision alone.

So you have brought me here—
to a place where magic is—
and because of that
I want to come into this room,
live the fiasco again—
me with dreams of frankincense
and you inexorable there,
devising ways to undo this
before the limbs have grown cold.

But witness this—you will never
rid yourself of this rankling,
even as Uriah lies sullen in the ground

and you wonder for what other man
my heart may burn.

Moments She Is Alive

Wondering how to read his glances,
she decides she will wear her fire,
a red velvet dress,
to the hearth of his hunger.

For many days he had been lost,
a starfish searching for coral,
somewhere inside her body,
until she could find words
to bring him to her fingertips.

If only for a moment each week
outside the cathedral, stolen kisses
are honeydew at twilight.

Blackbirds ripe in the clouds,
and November singing sunlight.

It is her birthday. Listen—
can you feel her being born?

VITA

Stacy Jones Waller was born in Memphis, Tennessee in November, 1973. She grew up in McNairy County, Tennessee and attended The University of Memphis. As a freshman, Waller, along with four other students, interviewed Georgia-born novelist Harry Crews and saw publication of the text in *The Georgia Review*. She also participated in workshops with visiting writers, such as Nancy Willard and Lucille Clifton. After graduating summa cum laude with a bachelor's degree in creative writing and a minor in journalism, she began work on her master's degree in English at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, receiving a graduate teaching associateship and a John C. Hodges Fellowship. Having found her first love—poetry—however, Waller has read much of her work at various Knoxville venues. In the spring of 1998, she was selected as a preliminary screener for the Margaret Artley Woodruff undergraduate award for poetry and won second prize in the Clyde Hoffman graduate award for poetry. She led a poetry workshop in the 1998 Young Writers' Institute for high school students at UTK and has published her work in East Tennessee State University's *Now & Then*. Waller hopes someday to teach creative writing.