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Eris Loses Her Footing

Kristin Campbell Robertson
University of New Orleans

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Eris Loses Her Footing

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre, and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by

Kristin Campbell Robertson

B.A. The University of Tennessee, Knoxville 1997
M.A. The University of Tennessee, Knoxville 1999

May, 2007

for my mother

Acknowledgements

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Preface

In the introduction I wrote to a thesis for my Master of Arts degree, I bestowed upon the reader a list of what I knew to be truths, universal and personal, about poetry, inspiration, and what I called “The Process.” Years later, I know none of them to be true. What I have learned is that poetry is definable in a thousand different ways and is malleable to the moment. In that earlier preface, I referred to my collection as poems that “interweave varying phyla of love.” I have no idea what that even means, and I do not know how poetry can manage that interweaving or most of the other grandiosities I effused. I likened inspiration to a dithyrambic moment of ecstasy, when the world is clearer and the tablet beckons one to write in bursts of what I can only assume would be lines of dactylic hexameter. I spoke of The Process as this nebulous, mystical being I had to succumb to and indulge. Today my approach to poetry has become, shall I say, far more *pragmatic*. It is something I do in between drinking my third cup of coffee and walking the dogs, not something I venerate or esteem from afar. I try to get poetry on my hands. I do not mean to suggest that poetry is not a part of my soul. It is. I attribute much of the enrichment of my soul to the poems I have read, including the work of those poets who have had profound practical influence on this collection: Louise Glück, James Wright, and Jack Gilbert.

I teach an introduction to writing poetry class, so I am asked to conceptualize the art and its many forms daily. What I try to do more of is offer tips or hints I have tucked away for years while reading AWP’s *The Writer’s Chronicle* and *American Poetry Review*. Several years ago, I read an interview with Louise Glück, and I cut out three quotes by Glück that remain on my bulletin board in my office. I try to keep each of the three pieces of wisdom in mind when I revise my work. The first quote reads: “Do you know what drives me crazy? The kind of writing

that contents itself with a sort of glib notation of an obvious truth or an obvious discrepancy in the world. The world should be taken seriously—especially if you only have one life, which I believe is likely.” Glück’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Wild Iris* approaches the often clichéd subject matter of flowers, and she even anthropomorphizes daisies and poppies. What she manages to render, however, is something beyond the “obvious truth.”

In “The Garden,” a young couple is planting a row of peas in light rain. The couple “cannot see themselves / in fresh dirt, starting up / without perspective.” The speaker of the poem watches her, who “wants to stop,” and him, who “wants to get to the end, / to stay with the thing.” Glück presents the scene, the moment, clearly to the reader. What she exposes next, though, is the close-up of the young woman’s fingers, “touching his cheek to make a truce.” They are “cool with spring rain.” When her hand leaves his face, it makes “an image of departure.” Glück explains how the image of the hand foreshadows inevitable sorrow when their relationship ends: “They think they are free to overlook this sadness.” The brief gesture not only serves as a harbinger of the end of the budding relationship between the young people, but it also reveals the mindset of the speaker, who is confident the relationship will not last.

In one of my poems, “Frozen Koi,” the speaker and her sister, with “young breasts like M birds,” are called to watch their father break ice covering a frozen pond. The fish, seemingly dead, rise to the surface. The girls begin frantically to remove the fish from the pond. Then they wait to see if the fish will come back to life as their bodies warm in the sun. These actions represent not only their coming of age and their mourning the loss of their childhood, but also a prevailing desire to be immortal. The attempt in this poem is to move beyond the “obvious truth” to explore how this image, the single moment, can resonate.

Glück's second piece of advice addresses both the ubiquitous Ezra Pound imperative "Make It New!" and the importance of sense in a poem: "I want as a writer (and a reader) to be outsmarted; as soon as I think *that's what this will probably do*, I think *how can I get it not to do that and still make sense out of the poem?* I can't give up on sense. Without it, a poem becomes completely plastic, malleable." Glück's choice of the word "malleable" is significant. A poem should not be anticipated but, at the same time, should avoid vacillation or obscurity. A "malleable" poem subjects itself to gross misinterpretation or ambivalence. I want my writing to be unexpected as well as clear. My poem "While You Were Out" takes some chances. The child practicing phonetics—the monotone rhythm of the different "th" sounds coming off the child's tongue—is meant to work as a metaphor for the ring pattern of the lover's phone call the speaker is not answering intentionally. At the end, the speaker is bent backwards into the gymnast's bridge pose, with her lover holding her waist for the "ocean liner to pass under [them]." I hope this image works to represent the magnitude of that moment, and its relationship, to the speaker.

Of the three quotes by Glück, this last one has been the most important: "Nothing is more crucial or more exciting than exactness. To be able to say fully and exactly what a thing is—a state of mind, a kind of experience, the significance of two things in a relationship—that is getting to the bottom of something." I have worked to revise each poem in this thesis for exactness—to get to a precise particularity with concision. For example, my poem "Donor" is currently in its tenth draft. The poem is about what happens when a woman who is chaperoning teenagers through a medical school is left alone and begins to wander. The speaker encounters a female cadaver left on a metal table in a classroom, and she chronicles what happens when she decides to spend the afternoon with her. In an earlier draft, I included the bus ride to the medical school:

Short on cash one summer, I chaperoned a troop of teenage future doctors.

On the bus they pulsed their shoulders to Green Day,
clutched blue scrubs to their chests like parachutes.

As they schlepped after surgeons through the medical school,
I had hours to wander alone, to make a skeleton dance.

I did not introduce the woman lying on the table until the sixth line of the poem. In the revised draft, the poem begins with her:

The woman lay, arms open, on a metal
table in the lamplit classroom.

I sat next to her on a stool. I sang her songs.
(Every song or hum has an audience.
At that moment she was all there was.)

The teenagers were tangential to the particular moment—the unfolding relationship with the woman—and thus read like “throat clearing,” a term Janet Burroway uses in her textbook *Writing Fiction*. In the earlier draft, I also left the woman’s side when I described how we can love a person in a particular moment when he or she is the only one present:

I believe I loved her then like you love the wrangler who stays
when your lip is still bleeding from the fall,

or the neighbor who freezes bread for weeks after your house burns—
I loved her because, for the moment, she was all there was.

Again, these lines shifted the focus of the poem away from that relationship between the speaker and the woman who, at the end of the poem, becomes her teacher and learns the donation of her body was not in vain:

Before I left, I filled her hand
with my pocket change, centered
the coins in her life-lined palms.

I showed her I was learning.
I whispered in her ear, *my teacher*.

I think the revision makes more sense than any of the earlier drafts, but I also take Glück's advice and attempt to keep the poem from going in an expected direction. Perhaps most important, though, is that the poem is more exact—and maybe even comments on the human condition—in this draft.

Before I was introduced to Louise Glück's poetry, I read James Wright. I find myself returning to a few pieces from his complete poems, *Above the River*, as I try to imitate their candid, human quality. While much of James Wright's poems are like Glück's in their seriousness and intensity, the poet invites the reader into quite pedestrian situations and conversations, and the speakers within the poems seem to stand back and ask a very idiomatic "so what?" For example, in "Well, What Are You Going to Do?," Wright places us in a pasture with a boy taking a nap. The boy, the speaker of the poem, wakes, and he finds his family's cow (their "poor lovely") giving birth to a calf, Marian. At that moment, the speaker asks the reader, "What was I going to do?" He explains that he doesn't know "anything about the problem / of beautiful women." He is afraid to run to his mother, but he doesn't want to leave the laboring cow. So he reiterates "What was I supposed to do there / But eat the apples while Marian's face / Peeked out slowly?" The boy eats the apples in his own Eden of sorts and falls from grace in that afternoon. He passes from innocence to experience as he carries Marian two hundred yards down the pasture as she "delicately spray[s] the insides of her beginning body / All over [his] work shirt." At the end of the poem, the speaker says he doesn't know that he belonged in that "beautiful place," but, nevertheless, he asks, "What are you going to do? Be kind? Kill? Die?" What I appreciate about Wright's poem is that he does not attempt a grand answer; he simply places the reader in the moment and shows us what he wants us to see. His poems feel gritty and real. The little boy steps in a pile of manure while he's trying to get Marian to come out, and

since he could not avoid it, “by God / [he] did not even try.” Standing at the boy’s elbow, the reader experiences the poem in a very palpable way.

One of my favorite beginnings to a poem is from Wright’s “Northern Pike.” It begins: “All right. Try this, / Then.” The poem seems to start *in medias res*, like Wright has been talking to us up to this point and simply continues the discussion. Now he wants for us to “try this” because he doesn’t think he has convinced us yet. Wright goes on to declare: “Every body / I know and care for, / And every body / Else is going / To die in a loneliness / I can’t imagine and a pain / I don’t know.” He continues with a list of images to convince the reader that we must go on living and “let the living go on living.” “They,” in the poem, pray for the “little movements that [they] knew the crawdads were making under water” and for “the game warden’s blindness.” They prayed for the “road home,” and they ate the fish whose body they “slit...Open from the hinge of the tail / To a place beneath the chin.” The poem ends as the speaker decides “there must be something very beautiful in [his] body.” Despite his failure to find an answer, he ends the poem with “I am so happy.” Similar to “What Are You Going to Do?,” “Northern Pike” is demotic and natural. The reader feels present in the poem. Wright finds a way for me to exist in his work and addresses me as if we are in a conversation up to, and after, the poem unfolds.

I imitate this kind of familiarity with the reader in my poem “Waiting,” in which the speaker talks to herself and, in doing so, attempts to confer with the reader as well. The whole of the poem transpires while the speaker waits outside alone as her friend attempts to open the front door with a jammed lock. The speaker begins to talk to herself (and the reader) in free association, shifting from pears in the tree to the fact that it is summer to her wanting to die when it’s warm:

I visit Melinda, my friend with a baby.
She opens the door, we smile,

and when she shuts it to unlatch the chain,
it sticks, and now her footsteps soften
as I wait outside. There are pears.

I want to die in summer. On my way over,
the billboard on Broadway
said to plan ahead. Buy a gravestone,
when you can still choose mausoleum or fire or
waxy begonias in a rusted cylinder.

A thunderstorm hovers behind crows
in the pear tree. Still, I don't walk around
to the back. I want to wait.
Melinda scrapes at the door. Her baby cries.

The intent here is to portray the natural jump from one subject to another when the mind is left to wander. Then the speaker realizes she talks to herself quite a bit:

My grandmother says the only thing wrong
with her hearing aids is listening to herself.
She went a decade not hearing her own voice.
She takes them out when she's alone.

One morning my neighbor brought me muffins
when she saw I was standing in the yard too long
talking to myself. I was learning French,
repeating *quelque chose* to a peony bush
I dug up in the vacant lot across the street.

The speaker stands outside the door and feels alone and strange; she wants to feel accepted and “normal.” She hopes her friend Melinda will save her and put her on the right side, the side of the normal, the sane, the *living*, again:

Now I wish I knew how to say
drops of rain and, then, *sun*
until Melinda comes for me,
until a crack in the door, that sliver of light.

The images within the poem are supposed to symbolize life (the baby, summer, pears), death (crows, looming thunderstorm, aging grandmother, the digging up of the peony bush), and a desire to return to the “living” side of the door (crying baby, the sun, the sliver of light), but the

poem is also simply about talking to yourself and the way the mind works. Like in Wright's "Well, What Are You Going to Do?" the speaker in this poem becomes aware of her surroundings and begins to explore what they might mean in that particular moment.

To approach only the practical application of Jack Gilbert's poetry is a bit like not being able to see the forest for the trees, but he has influenced the way I capture one particular moment by using images more than any other poet. Gilbert is unequalled in the mileage he gets from simple images. His images denote, connote, and allude. In "Married," Gilbert writes about returning to his apartment after his wife, Michiko, dies. He is able to capture myriad emotions in eleven lines of verse in which he focuses on the Japanese woman's hair. The first six lines reveal a debilitating grief:

I came back from the funeral and crawled
around the apartment, crying hard,
searching for my wife's hair.
For two months got them from the drain,
from the vacuum cleaner, under the refrigerator,
and off the clothes in the closet.

Then, when the distraught speaker realizes other women with hair like his wife's have been in his house, he feels what I imagine is a great helplessness, desolation, and resignation:

But after other Japanese women came,
there was no way to be sure which were
hers, and I stopped.

In the final image, the speaker is repotting one of his wife's plants, and he realizes that the hair in the plant must be hers. His feelings are bittersweet—a strange satisfaction and elation combined with a resurgence of grief:

A year later,
repotting Michiko's avocado, I find
a long black hair tangled in the dirt.

Jack Gilbert has lived an exceedingly full life, yet he never owned a home or seldom drove a car (Freeman 45). Gilbert lived in Greece; he advised Ginsberg on “Howl.” But what he writes about most is loving and longing and, ultimately, *living*. He includes Prospero and Eurydice in his poetry, but they are not privileged over the repotting of a plant.

In addition to these three poets’ boundless inspiration for my writing and for my life, the professors within the University of New Orleans MFA program have directed this thesis project by helping me to work within certain parameters. Professor Bill Lavender explained how poetry can be experimental without collapsing into obscurity. He also fomented my war with limp metaphors.

Professor Kay Murphy, who directed this thesis, encouraged me to appreciate the freedom of writing in form by requiring that each poem answer to an individual set of rules that the writer could prescribe. She focused semester-long workshops on form, on the power of the push and pull of blank verse, syllabic verse, the villanelle, and even the sijo. By the end of the term, writing in form felt natural and comfortable, supporting one of Robert Hass’s theories in *Twentieth Century Pleasures*. He writes that we are pattern-seeking animals: “We attend to rhythm almost instinctively...The process is going on in us all the time, one way or another.” In this collection, I have included “Last Night Epoch,” an Italian sonnet, and a few pieces in loosely patterned syllabic verse, such as “Deliberation of Hem.” I also attend to the rhythm of free verse, recognizing that each poem has its own “meter.” Like Hass suggests, no work can be “alive, intelligent, imaginatively open, intense at one level and not the other.” The content and the “shape in the rhythm” develop simultaneously.

In addition to the external form, Professor Murphy also reminded me to center my content, to work toward the middle between the didactic and the vapid, the static and the abstract, the sensational and the cold, and the self and the reader. If a poem is consumed by description, it does not move, and if it is void of any concrete detail, then the reader will not have as powerful a response as a poem with sensory images provoking the limbic system in the brain. If we believe, as Ted Kooser writes in his *Poetry Home Repair Manual*, that poetry is communication, then we also have to balance self-expression and an attempt at the universal—we must, as writers, consider who is reading the work. I use these guidelines not only in my own writing, but also in my classroom. If, according to T.S. Eliot, good poets borrow and great poets steal, then the same should go for teachers of writing as well.

Some of the poems in this collection are based loosely on Eris, the goddess of strife. In Greek mythology, Eris was the only goddess who was not invited to Peleus and Thetis's wedding. She went anyway, and when she was refused admittance, she threw an apple inscribed "To the Fairest" amidst the goddesses. Three of them—Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite—laid claim to it, and the rivalry eventually started the Trojan War. In thesis poem "Invitation," Eris is outcast, excluded from the wedding and waiting in the alcove. She discovers the worth of being on the outside with her loneliness and heartache. The poems hope to reveal how Eris, despite her reveling in nastiness, hatred, and cruelty, becomes beautiful. My pretend relationship with and manifestations of Eris continue throughout this manuscript and will eventually become a longer collection.

What I love about the inclusion of this goddess in my poems is that she is part of the human interaction; she is part of the human landscape. I love that poetry does not have to be necessarily highbrow or flighty. It can anchor. Even goddesses can come down to earth in poetry.

Jack Gilbert lived on the Greek islands for years, and he alludes often to Greek mythology in his poems. They appear within the text in between his repotting that avocado and killing a baby scorpion in a saucepan. When the *Poets & Writers* interviewer asked Jack Gilbert why he is *Refusing Heaven* (the title of his most recent book), he responds that he does not want to be at peace. In these poems, I want Eris to discover that her discord can be perhaps not peaceful, but beautiful for what it is.

In the end, I do not know how well my poems unearth the phyla of love, loss, birth, life, or death. I have a numbered broadside of the poem “The Mystery” from Louise Glück’s *Vita Nova*, and the last line of the poem asks: “Who are you and what is your purpose?” Perhaps none of these poems addresses this or any particularly grand question. But I hope a few ask or answer Wright’s “Well, what are you going to do?”

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Truly Eris is a goddess to fear.

EURIPIDES

I.

FROZEN KOI

Early winter in D.C. spiked record cold.
Dad called my sister and me to the backyard.
We watched as he loosened a haze
of ice over the forgotten pond.

Orange fish rose like copper ingots
sinking backward. We squinted to see, bent
at the waist; our young breasts formed shadows
on the snow like M birds we drew in school.

Dad explained fish could live, despite iced blood,
immoveable gills. My sister and I commenced
to harvest. We seined with the pond cover;
we trawled the slick nadir for the wedged.

When we had gripped each hard titian fish,
lifted body after body, what could we do
but watch for their recrudescence: O of mouth,
swelling of eye, impossible shiver of fin.

PROSOPOPOEIA

This morning I learn the whole
family died in the house fire
on Laurel Avenue. Burned mattress
bits pitched through the windows
like offal loop and twist in the air
even this far over on Clinch.

When I was five, my family
stood in a circle in our kitchen
because Uncle Denny said
he couldn't be alone.

After his cremation, in lieu
of shallow ocean or childhood creek,
we stuck our fingers in our mouths
to the first joint, dipped
them into the gray powder,
and swallowed Denny.

For years I feared I breathed
with two pairs of lungs,
Denny twisting around
my heart, my pancreas,
anchoring me like a sea anemone
to a piece of red coral.

HEIRESSES

My sister and I stole my mother's patchouli,
raked it into plastic wedding dinnerware.

In the basement, we prayed to the love goddess
(a plastic Barbie cake topper):

Please bring us the ones who stay forever.
We slipped our training bras through our sleeves;

we laid them, sacrificial white lambs, in front of her.
We sprinkled cinnamon over candles, drank our red juice,
rubbed relics, our talismans, hidden in that dark.

Our nipples stiffened, our cheeks flushed,
I took off my shirt first. Light filled the room.

Our brother tumbled down the stairs.
My sister and I closed our eyes, hands held,

but he flipped the lamp off again, headed back up,
yelling, *The cat's not down there, Mom.*

He's gone somewhere else.

YOU WON'T FIND YOUR FATHER IN THIS POEM

even if after he left he came back once
to take you to the knife museum.

Stroke all the chilled infantry muskets you want.
Bite gnawed amputation bullets. Line up your teeth.
Do it a hundred times.

Eat Happy Meals at the bird sanctuary. Birds won't come.
Birds won't share a sky, or a poem, with your father.

Even if he is already dead. Even if he has stitched wrists, a black suit, all of it.
Clasp Dad's cold hands; tell him it's raining.
Whisper *The air is limp with humidity and onion weed.*
Be quiet together for the first time.

This poem is only a haven for wild birds.

Here, ravens perch on power lines.
Sparrows swirl like sifted black sugar.

DECEMBER BRUME LIKE A SALVATION

Deer nip leaves just beyond
wintered trees, dip their heads

like long thin cranes, mechanical.
Breath visible, they hang in their own

cloud, a certain heaven. This time
of year bucks are already field-dressed,

antlers severed, forced genuflection,
so I cannot answer why they are still

here pulling ribbons of gray bark.
My brother opens the glass door,

hands me a throw, a mug of
Christmas tea, cinnamoned, thinned

with milk. I point to the trees,
and he bows his head slowly, not in

reverence, no gesture of atonement—
he just tries not to scare them away.

TEXAS BILL TINE

When my sister came home
from her first date with
thirteen-year-old Jason,
Mom scooped us into her bed
and told us the story
about her Jack Russell Terrier
who returned nightly with
cat heads inside his mouth.

She and her sisters stood aghast
at the edge of the drive;
shrills of *drop it drop it*
rose to the clouds over
the yellow house buoyed
with skulls the size of tennis balls.

He came, tendrils of tendons
dangling longer than his legs.
One of the girls reached out
first, pulled the black ball from
his mouth, as the other two
cried for her and the swipe
of deep ruby on her dress.

With one more cathead
slung-buried in the grass, glassy
eyes to the little girls' backs,
Texas Bill was gone again.

BLOOM

She said he taught her how to love, this man arrested for strewing
decayed bodies of dogs and cats along the forest line.

To save money on his pet crematory business, he let them rot and rot
and bloom with maggots, let them soak into the warehouse foundation.

Cops had to burn the place down. Owners read their dirt-caked brass tags,
pressed charges against the 28-year-old entrepreneur she had known six years before

when they sat in his mother's kitchen floor birthing kittens. They stuck thumbs
in washcloths and scrubbed the bodies dry, and after the blind kittens

found their mother and suckled into the night, she lay on top of him.

When he said *Don't take your body away*, she let him touch her
with gentle palms, soft with hours of midwifery.

II.

ARS POETICA

In 1970 my mother
hallucinated that monsters
circled her hospital bed
like hammerheads and makos.

She used to say they were
the closest she had ever come to evil.

Last year she warned the nurses
when they brought Demerol
to my bed that it could be genetic.

As they wired the drip,
my mother watched the door.

You may be expecting me
to say they didn't come,
but they did.

So I have this.
I can offer what I know

like a shark's tooth
in my open palm.

So take it, this poem.

DONOR

The woman lay, arms open, on a metal
table in the lamplit classroom.

I sat next to her on a stool. I sang her songs.
(Every song or hum has an audience.
At that moment she was all there was.)

I traced her labeled lungs.
I knew what all the parts of her were.
I cupped her pelvis, that wide jaw.

Before I left, I filled her hand
with my pocket change, centered
the coins in her life-lined palms.

I showed her I was learning.
I whispered in her ear, *my teacher*.

METAPHOR

Doctor says what rests against my diaphragm
is like an avocado. I think San Antonio where
boys spoon the glorious muck
to my plate. Bursts of onion, lime, the raw
leafy tang of green weigh my tongue
like heartache. An avocado nestles
my abdomen, so full and ready to rupture
it can't wait to shimmy up the knife,
show its pit and dole itself out.
I am not afraid as those little boys circle me,
sing in Spanish a song I pretend I know for them
and for me, a song I whisper all the way home.

TRUE RIBS

I had hours to wander alone in the medical school.
I found a skeleton, dangled from a hook drilled
through his skull. He was marked *Coccyx*,
marked *Sacrum, True Ribs, False Ribs, Floating
Ribs, Patella Patella*.

I made him waltz with me. I told him
my doghouse story, how I cut my finger off
sweeping glass off the roof for Precious,
the neighbor's dog, how I could see bone.

How when I fell off the railroad ties, I discovered
blood is purple. I opened my shirt and mapped
my six-inch scar, staple tracks, holes for the drains.
I lay bare all my wounds.

Then I chronicled his teeth, his recorded life,
every silver filling, gold crown. I traced his cracked
cranium. *Death was in the yolk*, he whispered.

He whispered *Hematoma*. He whispered *Sarcoma*.
And *Now I'll spin you*.

SCAR

Plate tectonics
is a theory,
I whisper
to my boyfriend
as he riddles
our nap with
seismic trivia.

Naked together
for the first time,
he traces
vulva to navel,
slows at the
unnatural slip
grown together
to a pucker.

This fault line
will divide us,
even if he pretends
otherwise.

State of flux,
I've been here before.
I've goddamned
this drift,
moved hands
to breastbone,
to thigh.

LAST NIGHT EPOCH

My scar divides us here inside these sheets
still; skin has swallowed other skin and smoothed
the edges tight along the fault. The grooved
pink lips purse around the weathered pleats.
Even though your palm will ease the hurt,
the belly tender warming to be soothed,
you never speak or moan. Instead you prove
with silent reverence: my scar, a conceit,
a god, who deserves tip-toeing. Your kiss,
like eggshells sprinkled, circles my fragility
reified. I am rays eclipsed, blistering
around the center of this nucleus
of womb, a line threatening fertility,
but when you listen, you hear whispering.

DELIBERATION OF HEM

The women choose goddesses at the cancer clinic. They raise and gesture with their blood-stuck arms, debate flounce of toga, crown flora. Tall Bette, skin cancer Bette, an ivory de Milo, legs chipped, chiseled from surgery, yells *I am the goddess of love! Aphrodite!* She grinds her hips into one of the clinic's recliners. *Didn't she rise from a clamshell?*

The women go back and forth. *Boticelli*, one of them says, picturing her honey-haired, hovering over water. *But she wore a short robe*, Bette says, brushing her gnawed legs as if she could shoo her pitted scars off the footrest. *I love I can imagine her with a short toga, hiked up, and long hair.* Bette mock combs, caresses air. Lifts her blanket like a dancer from

Montparnasse. Next to her, Lana is the sickest, so they coerce her to pick one. *Demeter for her lush fecundity*, she says. *The Earth was wrapped in her. My three kids used to link fingers and just span my circumference. I was husky, a cornucopia. Now I'm a thin corn blade. I am harvested. Ahead? Winter.* Someone whispers: *Choose Athena. Choose the goddess of war.*

Bette asks what Athena wears. *Body armor*, I say. *A helmet and goatskin shield. Sometimes a lance.* They all look at me. *Pick Athena*, I say. *Pick Athena.* When they ask me, I tell them I want to be Eris, the goddess of strife. The goddess of fear. I am no warrior. Beautiful women, I am that angry. Bette leans to me, *Hell, I want to dance that short toga to the moon.*

INVITATION

I am Eris, bridesmaid among rats.
Join me; let's warm apples in our hands
as we hum to dongs of wedding bells
in this dark, starless alley.

Hear lovers sigh through gray stones
of the basilica. I set my jaw to the cold;
my sinister laughs swallow guests' chirping.

Yet inside the ambrosia is sweet, the wine piquant.
If we dance in this unlit alcove, we might be
mistaken for the Graces, might be let in.
But for what? To sing?

I can count through wedding lace the hearts in my wake.

I rode beside my last lover; his chariot flattened fields of corn.
As bees plumed above our heads, my grumbles disappeared
into their drones, my hatred yellowed to pollen.

I fertilized red poppies. I was a part of the beautiful.

III.

DEAD CAT JUNE

We yelled *kitty, kitty* for my lost orange cat for three days,
told all the neighbors, stapled signs to lampposts, paid kids on bikes.

I made you search at midnight when your shift ended.

And when Tim next door told you about the huskies,

I know you didn't want to explain

about the hole in the fence, how she must've wandered in,

panicked at the two dogs prepared to make a game of her.

But you did.

When I saw her through the fence and collapsed in the grass,

you looked at me like I was someone you barely knew.

She climbed a fence, took off her shirt,

scooped up this dead thing.

DEAD CAT JUNE

I start digging a grave to bury her
behind our house,

the midday heat like pawing
through a weightlessness.

One by one, men from the neighborhood
arrive, bare-armed with shovels,

like it must have been to excavate Pompeii,

how they chiseled ash layers, brushed
the vanished who were caught as they fled,
frozen in time, rent by flame.

Soon dozens of us are mining,
following unspoken plans.

Then I step back, indicate it is deep
enough, far enough to inter a brave flier.

WAITING

I visit Melinda, my friend with a baby.
She opens the door, we smile,
and when she shuts it to unlatch the chain,
it sticks, and now her footsteps soften
as I wait outside. There are pears.

I want to die in summer. On my way over,
the billboard on Broadway
said to plan ahead. Buy a gravestone,
when you can still choose mausoleum or fire or
waxy begonias in a rusted cylinder.

A thunderstorm hovers behind crows
in the pear tree. Still, I don't walk around
to the back. I want to wait.
Melinda scrapes at the door. Her baby cries.

My grandmother says the only thing wrong
with her hearing aids is listening to herself.
She went a decade not hearing her own voice.
She takes them out when she's alone.

One morning my neighbor brought me muffins
when she saw I was standing in the yard too long
talking to myself. I was learning French,
repeating *quelque chose* to a peony bush
I dug up in the vacant lot across the street.

Now I wish I knew how to say
drops of rain and, then, *sun*
until Melinda comes for me,
until a crack in the door, that sliver of light.

NIGHT-BLOOMING CEREUS

Bicycler plummets off the bridge after the street fair. He splays over the rocks, yards from the river. Between morning grapefruit juice and night air lifting his arms, when he stops at the railing, peers over at sparkling moss, is the span of a lifetime. Newspapers will speculate whether he jumped, whether he meant to do it. Cactus flower, a whole life spent waiting for one night to open, to be winged—Even if you look away, he unfurls.

ERIS STANDS BY THE WATER

*Everyone in me is a bird.
I am beating all my wings.
~Anne Sexton*

Each morning
the wait for
the mangled dove
with a broken face,
beak shredded to starfish,
barnacled, his head
wind-stiffened,

is like measuring the time
between when
my mother hasn't told
about the abortion
and when she has.

The perfect birds—
sleek, copper-feathered
and obsidian-eyed—
mark a secret kept,
down-nestled,
quiet and warm.

Still, I wait mornings
for my dove,
scabbed and kerflooy,
to fly up, perch
for the thistle,
and just settle in.

LIFE SENTENCE

What we call *burned images*:

mauled cat, supine jumper
red fingerprints in your great aunt's hallway
wicked x-rayed cell cluster

we hang somewhere in the compendium
of our lives like numbered tools on hooks.

At the state penitentiary, good prisoners
stir tapioca vats with long steel ladles.
Black construction paper silhouettes,
like ghostwriters, await their return.
The staff counts each blunt saw,
each flour sieve, turned miscreant,
that one could slip under a countertop
to beat a roommate when the sun sets.

Checked present at dusk: strainer's
holes like stars, old eggbeater's gear teeth
in front of their shadows.

It waits for you, that body through fence slats.
Walk up on it. Hang it on its hook.

AUBADE

The first dawn when, for good, the humidity lifts,
you miss it. You want it again, that heaviness,
a weight on your shoulders like heavy hands.

You want hard breath, know it when it's gone,
and you stand on the porch reminiscing for nights
when the outdoors outheats the kitchen.

Just now, I feel a rise in my body, a swan song,
when what ripped begins to unheal and settle under
burned dogwoods and, by God, this morning
sets the weathervane to spinning.

IV.

WHILE YOU WERE OUT

I didn't answer the phone when you called,
just let it ring

like a child practicing phonetics:
there ... this way ... thə and the

I didn't make lists
why you needed me after all this time,
for your sudden wanting.

Maybe you got down to the lake again,
high from rain, and thought of me,
bent backwards into a bridge,
my hands sunk in the mud
at the edge of the water,

your hands lifting my waist
for an ocean liner to pass under us.

COME APRIL

We make love in the water, water that with our body
temperature has to equal 100 degrees or we'll freeze,

he says. Maybe, I think, we are in love again.
I step out of the pool to cut a deep blue hyacinth.

Last summer, I tilled their bulbs alone
with an arrow-nosed shovel. Tonight I snap

a green stalk with my thumb, cradle the flower
cluster in my palm to the edge so he can run

the blossoms across his face.
What is it?—For whatsoever a man soweth?

That he shall also reap? Be not deceived?
When I was nine, my brother Matthew painted

a turtle's shell. I set it free in fallen leaves. The next spring,
we slid our fingers over that faded violet M,

we whispered *good god* and *miracle miracle*.

DEATH VALLEY SIX

Furnace Creek, Earth's dry mouth agape,
drank a half foot of rain this year, and it was enough.

My lover and I drive ten hours to cup the desert five-spot,
count the thousands of panamint daisies,

lie on our backs to stick the poppies and trumpets
behind our ears and listen to them hiss,

tell us for years they were seeds over the alluvial fans,
and now they are tackstems, Sphinx moths, and birds,

and foxes, and us, food-chained all the way to the edge
of Badwater Basin. We stand on top of the car

to render our bodies to the chia, to the aster. But we know
we can't go back. Our lungs would drown in all that blue.

TWO POEMS

for Reina Sofia

1. MY GRAY DOG IS A SAGITTARIUS

born Centaur, digging up backyard
in December rain.

She digs deeper, digs farther
past her own dung into limeless silt.

All I want to do is to look up look out
at the stars, watch vulturine
Lyra and Cygnus rise.
I want to open my mouth
and swallow them whole.

The dog bays and yelps at some
thing, perhaps China, or for what she lost
even before she was born, her arrow and bow,
buried now in this hard dirt, lightyears away.

2. WHAT SHE WANTS

is to pilfer through campfire trash
gray dog, to lope mouths of dug-up
roots from one end to the other

is to stand at water's edge, lake-
drunk, and stare down floating driftwood

is not to feel free but be free
in the woods with acorns fall-
ing through the maze of lichened branches

is to hear the sirens and howl
with the wolves, with the coyotes

is to listen for the fire, just
beginning to commence the chase

is to push off through a hard world.

PLACE DU TERTRE, PARIS

The woman artist says she's tired of small paintings,
but those are the ones the tourists buy. She's getting rich,
she says, hawking her quick, watery brushstrokes beside the Sacre Coeur.

She's very thin. The bangles on her wrists slide freely up
and down her arms. They must clang when they fall, but the buzz
of people lined up for charcoal portraits drowns their jingling.

Dozens of tourists wait to leave Paris with drawings of their own faces.
I hold one of the artist's last matted pieces: A boat, a whale with silver teeth,
a white, jagged moon, and cobalt blue to look like deep ocean.

She painted a mermaid with flaxen hair and rainbow scales,
so I pay her the fifty euros. She unfolds brown paper, lays the painting face up,
says now she won't have to answer when people ask her
what myth she has painted, what legend.

ERIS LOSES HER FOOTING

I.

Even rising like a goddess
from a clamshell
won't keep you safe.

I refuse to sit
with the new women
since Bette died.

Winter is here and the ladies knit
scarves. A nurse spirals my neck

with purple, warm as a summer grape
against my throat.

II.

I sit in this plastic lawn chair
when my joints hurt
and count birds.
Forty-seven birds.

Forty-eight.

III.

My students ask if they can burn their risk poems.
We sling them like wild kites into a barrel
and toss in a match. Their mean uncles of flames,
their drowned kittens warm my hands.

IV.

My father brings her flowers
from the tops of graves he digs

to pay his way through school.

Jars of funeral roses wilt on my mother's
windowsill; death lilies rest on her creaking floor.

My father brings her flowers.

FOLDING THE CRANES

At this store in Chinatown, a marquee's reflection
blinks perfect seconds across the filmy window
where live crabs flip and sway in milky water.
Outside, round-faced boys hawk laminated cards:
a thousand sex positions for a dollar.
Behind the cash register, this old Asian woman
folds my shiny gum wrapper into a small triangle.
Her hair is down, not spun tight against the nape,
and despite hard rain and sourness
of damp tourists, she smiles at me and whispers
Four hundred eighty-two, leaning toward my ear,
as if for a secret. She offers the folded paper
in her palm. It trembles with the stream of shoppers.
When I don't understand, she nods to the cardboard box
propping the door. Inside it I find wings and necks and feet
from greasy paper doilies, sea foam guest checks.
I presume she folds all day, counting to a number that will
save her father from a cancer, lift her sister from a well.
I'll never know; I'm traveling on to Wilmington.
By midnight there will be heat and light, rolls in sweet butter,
stars I can see. Her voice whirls inside me,
echoes *pretty bird, luck silver*.

Vita

Kristin Robertson received her B.A and M.A. in English with concentrations in creative writing from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. She currently teaches creative writing and composition at UT and lives in Knoxville with her husband, her cat, and her two dogs.