Voices I Have Heard

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VOICES I HAVE HEARD

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of English

By
Rosemarie Wurth-Grice

May 2007
Dedication

To the men in my life who give me wings:
My sons, Jonathan, Alexander, Andrew
and soul mate and husband, Dorsey
Acknowledgements

It is with sincere gratitude that I would like to thank my thesis chair, Dr. Tom Hunley for his guidance in this creative project and committee members Dr. David Lenoir and Dr. Kelly Reames for their invaluable assistance and support. I would also like to thank members of the Poetry Salon for their encouragement and supportive critical voice.
Introduction

The poems in this thesis are an exploration of how two worlds can exist at once. The first world is the physical world as we perceive it through our senses and experience it through living. It is a cyclical world that begins with childhood, and moves toward adulthood, parenthood and death. In this world we go about the act of living. Yet it is in the second world, a more metaphysical one, that we are most alive. We often gain our knowledge of this world through observing and experiencing the natural world. It is a place in which we discover our true selves. This world exists like the mythical ethers; its boundaries are unmarked and the journey takes us into places of light and dark, of sound and silence. It is the coexistence of these two worlds that I attempt to explore in my writing.

To access this metaphysical world requires a certain sense of surrender. This can be difficult since it seems to be our species’ natural tendency to try to tame or control our environment. Therefore, we must not assume the attitude of a conqueror of nature. We must assume instead the role as a student of nature. That means being truly attentive, finding stillness and quiet, and being willing to listen to the world around us. Secrets can be told in bird song or in the shadows of oaks.

My love for nature and writing began at an early age. As a teen I fell in love with poetry. I discovered the poetry of the Victorians, Pre-Raphaelites and Romantics in old anthologies stored away in my grandparent’s attic. In these dusty bound volumes with their frayed covers, I discovered the lyrical language of Browning, Tennyson, and Keats. Delving into them instilled in me the appreciation for the beauty of words playing upon
each other.

In later years, teachers and mentors, like Peggy and Frank Steele, introduced me to the poetry of William Stafford, Ted Kooser, and William Carlos Williams. I was drawn to the straightforward economical use of language by Stafford. His style explored the inner and outer world in language accessible to the average reader. Kooser also used accessible language to describe the human condition. His portraits and narratives instilled validity to my own sense of narrative found in many of my poems. Finally, my poet husband, Dorsey Grice, introduced me to the poetry of Mary Oliver. Her incredible attunement to and observations of nature left me humbled.

Somewhere between those early discoveries of the traditional poetic canon and my studies of the modern/contemporary poets I have found my own voice emerge. The blending of the periods has created in me the tendency to write with an economy of language, combined with what I hope are lyrical, melodic lines that are imbued with a subtle sense of rhythm.

In writing this creative thesis I have divided the poems into two sections. In general they explore how we relate within physical, social and spiritual contexts. The first section is entitled “A Woman You Might Know” and deals more with the human experience of raising children, finding and losing love, grieving for the ill and dying, and searching for wholeness. The second section is called “The Sound of Trees” and deals with observations within the natural world. It includes poems dealing with the changing of the seasons, farm life, observing wildlife, and the spiritual world. Although each is divided according to a general topic, they both hopefully convey the presence of a dual
world in which we live every day and are occasionally allowed a glimpse into. It's a place where the voices of our ancestors gather round us to share their stories and teach us something of value about ourselves.
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I. A Woman You Might Know
Yesterday’s Shoes

Today I walked about in yesterday’s shoes  
remembering the children we were  
lying flat in the meadow  
our bodies like giant cookie cutters  
pressing shapes in the tall grass  

We were so clever then we thought  
our enemies could not see us  
as we lay hidden beneath  
the tallest goldenrod  
staring into a clear September sky  
watching a starling or solitary puff  
of cloud glide over and out of our vision  

And when we reluctantly rose to leave  
we’d pause to admire the child print pressed  
into the earth  

It was December when your mother called  
She told me it happened in some meadow,  
not ours  

Were you being clever?  
Was the sky clear?  
Were there starlings and puffs of clouds overhead?  
And when your buddies carried you away  
did any one of them pause to admire  
the man print you’d pressed into the earth?
Dancing With the Babysitter

Johnny Cash sang “Ring of Fire” on the radio and Wilma danced. Her skinny arms and legs skimmed across the waxed floor and we’d grab hold of each hand, spinning round and round in that circle while Johnny wailed “the flames growing higher.” Wilma two-stepped in her white canvas shoes and cotton dress. Her sandy permed hair never moved, but the scent of cherries and almonds swooshed around us. We fell down in a heap as the guitar Faded and our laughter spilled out the screened door and into the sixties.
Ode to the Shoes My Mother Gave Me

These clunky tan sandals my mother gave me
wrap around weary toes
cushioning my soles from concrete floors and
the broken glass ceilings I fall through.

Wrap around weary toes
holding me close to paths my mother walked,
the broken glass ceilings I fall through
on the way to somewhere better.

Holding me close to paths my mother walked
pushing away the brambles
on the way to somewhere better
she held back the low limbs so I could pass,

pushing away the brambles
cushioning my soles from concrete floors and
she held back the limbs so I could pass,
these clunky tan sandals my mother gave me

Cushioning my soles from concrete floors and
the broken glass ceilings I fall through
These clunky tan sandals my mother gave me
wrap around weary toes.
Notes from Outpatient

10:30
The woman in the pink bathrobe, covered in roses, sat waiting in a wheelchair. Her drawn face framed by lank dark hair. She looked old.

10:45
What did we look like to her, the boy and I waited for his name to be called? He with the dark curly hair and intense hazel eyes his mother with the tired eyes and creases around her lips worn deep.

11:00
We all sat there in the waiting room, wearing our scars like old manatees, gliding beneath the waters of our ancestors. We carried our fears like the moneychangers in the temple, greedy yet fearful of an angry God.

11:30
Before the procedure, the nurse told the boy, *The dye might make you feel warm.* Hold your breath: release your breath.

The boy smiled and said, *It felt like the sun was inside me.*
After Three Weeks in the Hospital

I walked into your hospital room
where you said the musicians
were playing their violins to soothe
your fevered sleep, but I had run them off.

Tell me, did they play for you
as they played for the maiden Joan?
She told her captors that saints and angels
spoke to her in the chapel bells.

I could not see your musicians,
or hear their melody.
Tell me, did they speak to you, too?
Did they mention my name?
Morphine Diary

I don’t know if the woman can tell it honest or if anyone can tell of the walls that are close, but not close enough to hold it all together, or of peace coming in the wake of a needle.

“It’s going to burn” the nurse says, and it does. After the burning, beads of sweat pool in the soft scoop at the base of the throat and vibrate with each pulsing beat.

A shift of women measure time by touching, listening, and writing it down.

They call it a history, but it doesn’t tell the best part. They hang it on a wall that is not close enough to hold it all together.
Routines

I see my father every weekend.
After the third treatment,
He greeted me shyly –
His thick white hair mostly gone
and with it his vanity.
We count weeks and good days.
Cat Scans,
   blood work,
   chemo,
become routine
   as brushing teeth,
   tying shoes,
   dying.
Thanksgiving Afternoon in the Glenwood Cemetery

The children tumbled out among the tombstones, their laughter caught between stone and air. My sister and I worked quietly, trimming pliant boughs from the ancient juniper, heavy with blue frosty fruit. We carried small armfuls of the sweet gummy evergreen, its scent spilling onto our clothes, hair and hands. Our heads were filled with sweet cedar.

In the still afternoon, a whirlwind began to swirl atop a small hill among the stones. A whip of wind picked up dry leaves and twirled them in a spiraling dance. We watched the leaves skirt across the ground and rise – We waited for the wind to cease and leaves to fall loose, but the leaves lifted and rose into the crisp air.

Higher and higher they rose until the leaves were only glints of light, sparkling like mirrors in the sky. We stood there even after they were long out of sight, unable to speak of what we had seen. We walked to the place where the whirlwind began, a familiar spot, nestled between two mounds of earth and two polished granite stones the graves of my brother and father.

How they loved to dance.
My Mother Called Today

She had gone to the hospital to visit my aunt after her stroke.

My aunt, beautiful, with her quick mischievous laugh and easy smile, who loved nice clothes.

My aunt can’t talk, write, or swallow.

Mother found her alone and naked, having pulled her gown off and tossed it to the floor.

*Aren’t you cold?* asked my mother. My aunt nodded.

So Mother picked up the gown, dressed her and pulled the blankets over her thin body.

*I can’t get it out of my mind,* Mother said. *I did not want to leave her alone.*

When I hung up the phone, the room was so cold, I lit a candle for the three of us.
A Woman You Might Know

Her laughter caught in her throat,  
a bird in a net,  
she walked into rooms wearing  
her grief like a wet raincoat,  
afraid to sit in comfortable chairs,  
but not sure why.

One day she looked down  
in horror to discover  
parts of her were missing.  
She had been cut so finely  
that flaps of skin hung loose  
and light shone through.

She searched out  
the lost pieces  
in houses she once lived in,  
in beds she no longer slept in,  
in closets her mother kept shut.  
and one by one she sewed them  
back on.

Years later you could see her  
glancing at her reflection in shop windows  
to see if today  
she might be whole.
When I Lost My Father and My Son Turned 13

Where are we going? I asked, when my father lay amid flowers and organ music, and my son was escorted home by an officer at 4 a.m.

I’m not ready for their rites of passage. They pull me along with them dragging and screaming and tearing at my hair.

I never meant to go this far. I am forty and that’s enough.

I never asked to be 13 once more or lie cold beside my father in a satin lined box amid the yellow lilies.
Finding Our Way

We drove along familiar streets to the hum of the car engine and a low song on the radio. Andrew, the youngest, nestled between his brothers, craned his three-year-old head above the back seat.

*Look Jon, he pointed.*
*There in the darkness – it says We’re almost home.*
Copperhead

One night the boys came running in the door
Yelling “Copperhead!”
then turned and ran out the door into the dark,
the scent of sweat and fear
coiled in the air behind them.

The porch light shone down on
my son who stood with hoe in hand,
his young frame intense,
his eyes fixed at the snake curled up
in the garden.
He held the hoe I had used earlier
to plant the tomatoes, transformed it
into a weapon,
striking, cursing, striking, cursing.
One insult followed the other as he struck
out with such assurance at the creature
flailing and flopping back and forth in
rhythm with the hoe’s steady beat.

Its pale brown body twisting
in the dirt did not seem so large
as I studied the black spots on its
soft belly and the band of brown that
ribboned its back.

When finally the writhing and
cursing stopped,
he lifted the lifeless body with the rake
so we could see it whole,
its bruised viper head now visible.

He carried it away to the edge of the yard
and flung the serpent back into the night.
Have You Seen Me?

Our sons ran like spiders over the sand,
while we trudged on like great heavy lions,
sinking to the ankle,
dogged as the wind that pushed grit in our teeth.

We tried to keep up, but the boys and Youth,
light as your hat that
tumbled across the dunes,
soon became specks of sand themselves,
disappearing on the horizon before us.

They couldn’t hear me call them in the howling wind.
I don’t think they ever looked back.

Have dunes ever swallowed up children?
Are there milk cartons in the desert?
Think Fondly, if Not Tenderly of Me

I picked up the phone and listened to the steady rise and fall of your voice one thousand miles away.

You, there in your tiny office surrounded by pictures, black and white pasted to the walls, notebooks on full shelves, and you already on your way back home

Drawing in your cigarette and blowing rings around the room
When I think to call it’s always too late, you say
How late is late? I wonder as smoke circles my head.

I’ll call before I leave.
Good, I hear myself saying – sliding my fingers across the table where we last worked on some paper that later lay scattered on the floor like some cast off lover.
If Anyone Wants Me I’ll Be In the Garage

sitting between a Christmas tree and broken rocker.
I tried the bathroom, but children and husband
found me out.
Are you sick? they ask with good intentions.
Will you fix me a peanut butter and jelly sandwich
when you get out?

In the garage I wonder if I can hide
among the bicycles with flat tires, the old
saddle and reins, the damaged furniture.

Can I sit for a while and get past the place where the cat leaves
dead frogs on the doorstep, husk of shrews in the drive,
or headless chipmunks on the sidewalk?
In the corner the cat has curled up
in the folds of a foam mattress
and waits.
During the Divorce

The woman wrote everything down so she wouldn’t forget,
Filled glossy backed journals when there was no one to tell
Scribbled notes in the margins at 2 a.m. while cigarette smoke
Curled above her like a gray lazy cat.

Now when she looked at them they glared back at her.

_Burn them_ advised a friend,
So she piled them high on the grill one dry summer evening
a suburban sacrifice, a funeral pyre.
She opened the ink-filled pages to the sky,
Held match after match to the pages,
Only to watch the edges go black.

Finally she doused them with lighter fluid
And stepped back as she threw her last match.
The journals flashed with light,
fire rippled purple and amber,

and the words slowly burned
off the pages and curled into a fine ash
to speckle the sky when the breeze gathered
around and lifted them skyward.

At midnight, the embers still glowed low
like eyes in the dark.
Impatient and tired, she finally poured water over the small
pile of hot ash that hissed at her as she walked away.
I Don’t Play the Piano Anymore

Miss Nora Mae Fox, a small spinster who smelled of talcum, gave piano lessons to sweaty fingered girls like me, I imagined a lost love who existed in the echoes of notes floating off into the spring air.

When I was 13 the lessons ended. And when I went off to school the house fell silent -- no more broken notes and stumbled melodies.

When I married, the roof began to leak and mother put a bucket on the piano to catch the water that dropped in perfect pitch.
The Puppeteer

She wanted to be an actress,
the blonde with those dark brown,
dancing eyes that disguised how long
ago she had performed.
Her left ring finger, gold adorned,
bonded her to a man who forbid her to
step on stage without a cloth and wooden figure –
Something hollow –
to hold between her and the world.
True Story

Outside I heard this sound
soft and ethereal
like a hundred tiny bells ringing through a fog.
Suddenly it was a Thursday
and I was rushing to the window
To see this young dark haired woman
walking to my door.

In her hands she carried wind chimes
one suspended from each finger.
In broken English, she explained they were for sale
for some youth league or other.
I didn’t know; I didn’t care; I bought them all.

Carefully I pulled them from each of her fingers
and slid them on my own.
She stood as I circled the room
once, twice, like a child
my hands outstretched
letting the steel resonate
through wood, flesh, and air.

And she smiled and slowly spoke
They fill me with such joy.
Without them I am silent.
Free-writing in Bloomington, Indiana  
(home of the Dali Lama’s brother)

The woman beside me writes  
surrounded by sculpture, framed  
canvas and books piled  
hip high around us;  
We are engulfed by the enormity of words.

A clock in the room  
ticks out a steady beat  
Tick, tick, tick,  
a metronome,  
like water dripping  
from the faucet of the  
Dali Lama’s brother.

A misshapen sculpture  
perches on the table,  
Samurai swords lean  
in the corner,  
a professor’s pipe, poised  
by his chair, waits.

In time we will write it all.  
Write out the truth with the tears of  
a thousand grieving mothers,  
who scream for justice.  
In the cracks of marble floors,  
beneath the desert dust,  
behind rusty chains and bushes  
lies the filth of a generation.  
The women will sweep it out  
with the enormity of their words.
Reading Poetry

This morning your words
Began to creep inside me
Filling up the empty rooms
Where I thought only I lived
The pages became walls
You hammered your grief to.

Here I found myself in winding corridors
Stumbling over carcasses you left unburied
Strolling over beaches you once walked.

I followed your measured path
Wondering where the words would take us.
Perhaps to pastures where clover grows
Above a rusting hammer
And stones bruise our knees.
Popcorn Clouds

For Madge and Perry Brite, ages 12 and 4,
Victims of the Cimarron Flood, 1914

My papa called them popcorn clouds,
one small cloud floating high in a Kansas sky.
Before long, there would be two,
them three, then a sky of clouds clumped together,
the weight of their sum
too much for the air to hold.

So it began to rain almost a hundred years ago.

When the clouds gathered,
Madge watched her little brother play,
watched as the prairie long dry with
dust and grasshoppers became mud

and the shallow Cimarron
began to swell,
so fast that in moments
the fields became seas
and their house an ocean away.

Madge took the four-year-old
by his hand and tried to run back to the house,
but the river, now out of its banks,
rose up their ankles and knees and
they couldn’t run.

So she held tight to her brother,
his golden hair now drenched in rain,
held tight as the rolling water
pushed them along,
carried them away.

When the rain stopped
everything was gone:
the house, the barn,
the children.

Nine miles downstream a farmer saw
a flash of golden hair in the buffalo grass,
found their small bodies lying upon the bank,
and buried them here beneath the Kansas sky.
Teaching Shakespeare

We killed Caesar five times today
three times in the morning,
Caesar in heels, Caesar in a football jersey,
and Caesar in cornrows cried “Et Tu Brute?”
“Let’s go to lunch.”

A riot broke out in periods seven and eight.
Conspirators ran for their lives
when the secretary made afternoon
announcements,
and a mob, on the way to the bus,
considered killing
a poet for his bad verses.

Tomorrow we go to war!
II. The Sound of Trees
The Grand Canyon

When I was five years old
I traveled to the Grand Canyon,
a five-day journey
in my parents’ 61’ Buick.
We drove across the endless desert
as the sun shimmered off the pavement and
danced from the silver hood ornament and
steam poured out from the overheated engine
every 35 miles.
When we finally reached the canyon
my father picked me up on his broad shoulders
and walked over to the red rocky edge.
I thought I had never been so tall as then
sitting atop his shoulders staring down and out
into that immense canyon
where water had cut a furrow in the earth a
million or so years before I was born.
And somehow it was comforting to know
it had waited for me to come here,
to lean forward,
and spit over the edge.
Equinox

The September light changes entire days to afternoon. It filters through oak leaves and sumac, while a v of geese flies overhead, casting shadowy vectors on the ground.

Van Gogh stood in a field and waited for an afternoon like this, paints dripping from his fingertips, galaxies flashing in his eyes.

We are sunflowers, always turning to face the sun, leaning into that slanted light. We wipe the galaxies from our eyes, while Gaia washes the green from her hair, and spreads her straw locks to dry -- golden, umber, in this autumnal light.
A Winter Solstice Song

When I was a girl I made a wish on the wind,
watched it bend the grasses in the fields and
chase the leaves from the trees
in search of...

Today we have flung open the doors,
washed the steps with rain
brought here by a northern wind.

The candles whisper in foreign phrases,
flickering words that we have come to speak,
tendered by mossy thoughts,
keeping us warm on this
long and dark winter night.
Squirrels Scan the Heavens

There must be spring somewhere
beyond the war drums’ rumbling beat --
time when winter subsides into the
dark places of the earth
and Ceres waits for the return of her daughter.

The world is gray and damp,
shivering in her night dress,
warming up her back to May.

In the forest you can feel it
as a willow shakes loose
her woody locks
and squirrels scan the heavens.
Driving Past a Grove after Dark

Young trees shot up from loamy ground,
their willowy white bark exposed to night air and headlights --
slender stark silhouettes against the black sky.

Schoolgirls might stand this close
in whispered laughing groups,
leaning against each other in mock embarrassment.

But these woods are silent.
Secrets rest beneath leaf cover and moss.

Glances exchanged or whispers uttered
are unintelligible codes passed on by blinking owls
as we intruders dim our lights in respect and
pass on through the dark.
The Sound the Trees Made

The day we strung fence along
the wood line it was raining
warm drops, soft and invisible.
You strung the barbed wire around
this place, drawing it tight.
I listened to the wind brushing the treetops.
The canopy bent with the tug,
the great sway that made the wood hiss
a loud whisper, “Sh, sh, sh, listen.”
The job finished, we walked single file
along the cow path to push
the cattle into their new pasture.
A crack of a limb forced us to stop.
The branch tumbled down and caught
in a tangle of branches.
It held fast, not yet ready to fall silent.
Rivers

I watch them
from the bank
Spring
Fall
The channels changing
as water is held
or released.
At the dam
sand bars appear
or disappear
in the shallows.
Herons take flight.
In the morning
hawks soar
above the serpentine
surface.
On flat bottom boats,
laughing people
float by,
dodging fallen limbs,
submerged logs.
Not everyone will watch
the river.
They speed along the river
and cross bridges
with windows rolled
and music turned up.
They won’t hear
the turtle plop
in the water.
They won’t see
the heron take flight.
They will follow
their own course.
I Slept Near the River

Closed my eyes to the sound of tree frogs, owls, and dogs barking messages in the night.

Spring rains came
rushing down the banks,
transforming the lazy green stream.

Floodwaters rushed by and rapids
crashed through my head.

Lonely nights I dream of rain.
**Waiting for the Loons**

At night when light shuts down
the ears will listen for the heart,
which is too busy for sounds
other than its own clinched pulse.

Listen for the steady breathing of children
cradled deep within a mother’s worried thoughts
of hungry hawks and ripping claws.
Listen, like the nestlings that know
when to be quiet.

Small tufts of wind, feather, and bone,
hold tight to their silences and
wait for their mother
wait for the song of the loon.
The Night the Dogs Came

They snatched up the calf, still wet,
dragged it into the woods,
left its mother bellowing and
bounding against her world,
crying out to thieves in the dark.

You followed the calf’s call
down the rocky bluff,
your flashlight’s beam
bouncing off the far riverbank
and random tree top, marking your place
in the misty night.

“Easy girl,” I whispered to the still moaning mother.
as we shivered in the darkness grown too quiet,
and waited for you to return.
The dogs’ faint barking grew muffled
in the river’s freezing mist.
Middle Ground

I come to the land
And walk the acres of pasture to find you
Sidestepping thistle and thorn

Sweat trickles down my knees
Flies buzz a taunting dance around my head

Alone I wait
in a rusted chair
that waits
for a coat of paint.
We wait together.

Brilliant blue feather
Perch on a wire
And sing a song so small
And shy

A rustle of leaves
Announces the lizard
Has joined us

A frightened jump and
a raccoon searches,
but can’t find me,
looks through me,
but doesn’t see.

Is this what happens
When nature claims us?

The land envelopes flesh
and bone,
fills the spaces between
life and death and life.
What I Love Beyond the Telling

While driving across the field in the late afternoon, we watched three deer step out of the woods and stop, and stare at us with tilted heads. We stopped too, waited, not saying a word. The deer ran on, leapt the fence to the neighbor’s field.

In silence we started the truck, bounced up the hillside, dodged purple thistle heads grown wild. In the pasture, you got out, tended the cattle while I waited in the warm cab with windows down.

The afternoon was quiet, so quiet I could hear the cows tear the grass from the ground in great swaths. Tough stalks squeaked with their chewing, breathy, slow and rhythmic. Mammoth mowing machines moving across the pasture. I watched you walk among the herd, steward of these grazing beasts, witness to their grassy feast, the back of your silver head haloed in smoky midsummer light.
The Goat Woman Took a Walk

In the East she found a pebble,  
like a dappled brown and black toad.  
A child might send it hopping across  
the lake.

In the North she found a twig  
covered in silver and gold lichen  
shaped like a cowboy poised  
to draw his pistol at terrapins and toadstools.

In the South she found a leaf  
bleached bone white  
thin as onion skin  
a fragile fossil  
the emerald drained from its veins

In the West she found a smooth gray stone,  
a viper’s head,  
eyeless, toothless,  
a compass point  
directing her nowhere.
What Sound Does Empty Make?

It’s the sound of things
the woman tires to think of,

the key rattling around the iron box
she wears about her neck

clanking and clambering
against aging walls,

muffled among piles
of hollow promises,

silenced occasionally beneath
layers of childish dreams.

Sometimes she pauses to listen
to the key’s familiar rattle

and presses the rusty lock to her lips.
Cactus Dreams

I planted moonflowers on the bedroom porch.
In a month the vines will spill over the rail.
Blossoms large as porcelain plates
will unfurl,
filling the night with the heady scent

Dreams, like old photographs,
travel to me on the scented air --
dreams of a Navajo boy
standing on the branch
of a giant saguaro
while a coyote sits at his feet.

We’ll sleep as the flowers
lift themselves up like mirrors
to the orange moon who gazes down
to see her pocked face reflection
and the trickster howling at her feet.