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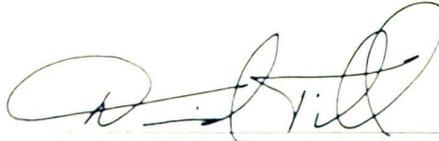
A TIME AND A PLACE FOR EVERYTHING

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SYLVIA L. GRIFFITH

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Sylvia L. Griffith entitled "A Time and a Place for Everything." 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.



Dr. David Till, Major Professor

We have read this thesis  
and recommend its acceptance



Accepted for the Council



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Date January 16, 1999

# **A Time and a Place for Everything**

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

Austin Peay State University

Sylvia L. Griffith

August, 1997

## **Abstract**

The following poems are reflections upon time, places, and things that endure. The collection is based upon observations of non-fictional subjects. Some are significant only to their particular locales; some are significant to the world. Organized chronologically according to the author's encounter with each locale, the poems are the result of research, Ignatian meditation, and a sincere attempt to enhance the reader's awareness of, or delight in each subject.

Among the impressions of immortal places are glimpses of creatures who share the earth with conquering, warring, ruling—unruly—mankind. These creatures possess the same timeless quality that pervades the scenes of past drama. For eons they quietly, tenaciously have maintained the simple habits of their predecessors. They are the counterpoint to mankind, devoid of angst and the sense of past and future. They are the antithesis to the struggles evidenced in the great cities and battlefields of the world, and in the ravaged minds of men—the struggles to change the world, and thus, to become immortal.

Time and place endure beyond us, and we are merely creatures with finite, fragile lives. Yet, we are part of the history that lives within us, its slightest footnote reverberating throughout the limits of human existence.

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## Sunday

*Schulenberg, Texas—1963*

Farmer's head perches  
on a starched white collar,  
leathery red neck buckles  
in deep creases when he looks up  
at the preacher in the pulpit,  
rough neck criss-crossed with  
deep white fold-here marks—  
marks that never go away,  
from looking up.

Bristled gray head,  
scalp showing all under,  
bristly pins of gray hair  
coated in Brylcreme,  
short-chopped hairs  
look up;  
some roll into leathery neck creases.  
White scalp at a cap line—  
crude ears stuck on haphazardly  
below the line—  
sunburned ears  
hear the Word.

Bulky scrubbed-nail fingers  
fumble with the hymnal.  
Big blunt hands swallow the hymnal.  
They wrinkle the words

that praise.

Clumsy farmer's hands fold in prayer—  
gold band buried on a bulky finger—  
big, rough hands  
plead for mercy.

Coarse angled unnotes shoot from  
deep belly-laugh places.  
Unsweet sounds that call pigs and cows—  
heavy,  
yodel-sounding,  
tough tones  
bow to the Lord.

Packed tight in Sunday collars  
on top of great  
broad shoulders  
that carry the land,  
carry the family,  
depend on the weather for  
everything—  
strong shoulders that  
carry the cross.

Big white-sleeved arm  
holding down a bench back  
slung over with a  
woolen coat  
that reeks of moth balls;  
slick-polished hard church bench,

dark-polished, tight shoes,  
creaky shoes buffed shiny,  
pinching, slick-bottomed shoes  
remember the Sabbath.

Old Spice  
makes his eyes tear  
after an hour.  
In the field lunch would be over  
by noon  
when the preacher  
condemns.  
When the pastor  
blesses,  
he will  
depart in peace.

## **Mrs. MacMahan's House**

*Columbus, Texas—1964*

"Baby Lee will fry you an egg," said Mrs. Mac  
as she showed me the kitchen,  
for whenever I arose  
from the dreamy third-floor quarters  
where I stayed one magic night—  
on high, aloft,  
above the roof-tops  
lined with multi-colored cats  
who padded silently from my place  
to the ditched-roof angles of outdoors,  
to the moon, at night  
that shown down silver-white  
on all their soft, plush fur.

I saw them early in the hazy dawn  
before I went down,  
silently,  
to Baby Lee,  
to ask if she might fry an egg for me.

## **Wednesday Night**

*Columbus, Texas—1966*

Wednesday morning the editor was serious:

MacMahan moved into the press room,

set the galleys,

frowned a lot—

drank pots of coffee.

Everyone fell silent while he worked.

All week before

he'd seldom bother

with the news.

But Wednesday heated up

with nervous walks

and drinking,

coffee—

Then the anxious hours

Wednesday night,

the galleys laid,

the presses ran,

the papers folded, rolled and bundled,

labeled,

bagged and carried all the way

around the corner,

to be mailed.

On Thursday we'd have cinnamon rolls,  
boiled coffee and kolaches—  
and we'd relax,  
until next Wednesday  
rolled around again.

## **Printer's Devil**

*Columbus, Texas—1966*

Thursday was his day—  
the printer's devil.  
He'd gather up the hunks of lead  
that told the whole town's story for the week.

Our small town's news  
he'd gather up and melt it down—  
throw in the pot to melt  
into  
the things that happen  
tomorrow,  
next year,  
ever after.

The printer's devil  
had power over time—  
power to make yesterday,  
today,  
and tomorrow,  
all the same.

## **The Big Funeral**

*Ft. Sill, Oklahoma—1969*

Charlie Floyd has passed away.

He lies in state

on a velvet-veiled day-bed,

covered to the neck

in a crushed velvet blanket.

And people come

by the thousands

to see his corpse,

to see the corpse of

Public Enemy Number One.

Stilled, at last—

enclosed,

encased,

embalmed,

emblazoned

in the memory of

America—

America depressed,

America at risk:

America

in love with raw rebellion,

in awe of the defiance,

enamored of the violence,

he was.

We made his  
the biggest funeral,  
ever,  
in the state of Oklahoma.

## **The Monkeypod Tree**

*Schofield Barracks, Hawaii—1982*

In Hawaii a giant Monkeypod tree  
spread over our unfenced yard  
that ran together with our neighbors' yard—  
that shaded our four sons' play.

The Samoan neighbors borrowed our yard  
for a grand family celebration—  
they asked us to come, but we knew to decline,  
and that left them free  
to insist that our sons  
should attend and should see  
the grand attendee—  
the prince of Samoans in Hawaii—  
so they could hear the stories he told,  
when he performed that, the only task  
his status would allow.

On luau day, they streamed to the house—  
the big-boned, dark men and women—  
with broad, brown armloads  
of firm taro root  
to be pounded and mashed  
into three-finger poi—  
the most special poi—  
for the most special feast.

Their huge hands were scarcely tested  
by the heavy, deep, covered pans  
of chicken and beef  
they would sliver and steep  
in teriyaki sauce and soy.

Their mile-wide shoulders  
heaved baskets of fruit—  
blushing guavas,  
island-ripened pineapples,  
papayas and pears,  
lychees and mangoes,  
black-skinned avocados  
and red passion fruit.

Rough sacks of coconuts,  
melons, and sugar cane,  
stalks of bananas,  
chopped fresh from their trees,  
and bunches and bags  
of sweet-smelling blossoms—  
plumerias and orchids  
for the fresh-flower leis.

Soon the women were busy  
with peeling and slicing,  
with chopping and laughing  
and taking the talk  
that their mothers and grandmothers talked in Samoa—

the big, shameless talk, unafraid to be heard.  
It jumped from their mouths,  
it clapped on their ears,  
it ran constant from one to another—  
it rumbled, increased, compounded, exploded,  
then fell to a simmer again.

The slap-slapping sounds  
of their flip-flop sandals  
punctuated the rising, rich tones  
of the round-sounding, vowel-laden syllables  
that leapt from their mouths as they worked.

The men dug an imu behind the lanai—  
the pigs would be cooked the old way.  
Nearby they stacked mounds  
of rough lava rocks  
and great dark-green bunches of leaves.

On the clothes lines over the front lanai,  
hung two clean, fat kalua pigs.  
They would pass—wrapped in ti leaves—  
one-by-one, through the imu,  
all under and over red-hot lava rocks,  
'til their flesh became tender  
and moist and delicious,  
and fell from the bones at the touch.  
They moved oil-drum grills  
alongside the pit

and filled them with damp kiawe wood.  
Soon the fires would be heating  
the big imu stones,  
to roast poultry and beef for the feast.

The men hauled ice- and beer-filled chests  
from their trucks to the side of the house,  
and lined heavy steel coolers of fruit punch  
along a low "kid-high" wall in the yard.

At mid-day the smells and sounds of Samoa  
settled down in our neighborhood,  
and the two yards were set with tables and chairs  
for an evening of party and food

The cooking continued, the women withdrew  
to comb out their thick, curly hair  
to adorn their black tresses with flowers and leis,  
to whisper, to talk, and to share

Men shed their shirts and wrapped bold-printed skirts  
on their waists, in the way of their fathers  
They postured and laughed, as they tended the imu  
and relived the old times of the islands.

Finally, the prince of Hawaiian Samoans  
arrived in a Toyota truck.

The uncles and friends eased him out  
and positioned him  
under the Monkeypod tree.

The children all gathered around him,  
and brought him refreshments and leis,  
and patiently waited  
to hear his grand stories  
of their ancestors of ancient days.

When the feasting began,  
the big, shameless talk  
of the women and men and the children,  
rose up from the lawns  
to the branches above—  
an umbrella of sounds  
in the Monkeypod tree  
that spread over our two yards.

At last, after dark,  
they pushed tables aside,  
turned their cars—headlights on—towards the yards.  
The prince settled back  
against the big tree  
and faced where the singing would be.

Then the lusty brown men

in their bright island skirts,  
and the women in their sarongs,  
danced familiar Samoan dances  
and sang favorite island songs.

Sah-mo-ah! Sah-mo-ah!  
The men chanted, together,  
in rich, deep tones—  
Their resonant Samoan voices  
rang the ancient Samoan song.

The singers filled the cloudless sky  
with the sweetest, fullest chords  
that arose from the lawns  
to the tops of the branches—  
rose up like a cloud  
of soothing, smooth sounds,  
rose clear to the top  
of the Monkeypod tree—  
and hung like a shower  
of Monkeypod stars,  
over our two island yards.

## **Kamehameha**

*Hawaiian Islands—1982*

Canoes slice silently through crystal blue.  
The rivers are few, but clean—pristine.  
Once Iao ran red with his enemies' blood—  
once their bones stopped it up.

He shocked the last that fought against him,  
to fling themselves from lofty Pali Pass,  
rather than to face his wrath.  
His reputation preceded him—  
ran after them.

Below, beneath, and far beyond,  
the emerald forests nestle at the Pali's feet,  
to fine white crystals,  
polished, sparkling all along the windward beach.

His empire stretched from tiny Niihau—  
untrod by haole feet—  
past Kauai, Lanai, and Maui—  
named for Pele's brother—  
where, high atop Pacific foam,  
dashed fast and hard on lava coasts,  
above the Sacred Pools,  
the giant Haleakala,  
grasps every rising sun within its massive, golden bowl—  
to his Hawaii,

massive, mutable:  
an island cooked by Pele's wrath,  
that pours from  
Kilauea's fire pit—  
spills down the mountainside  
and steams into the sea.

And in between the teeming Gathering Place—  
its sere side gifted to the Western world,  
its windward holding fast the ancient ways—  
and out beyond the plumbless depths,  
straight down to deepest places,  
unseen fears—  
where humpback whales cavort,  
where sea snakes,  
sharks, and unknown things traverse,  
up, up to Molokai,  
across to leper's Palaupapa . . .  
place of horror,  
place of shame—  
place locked between the mountains and the sea—  
the place of no return.

Kamehameha spread his might  
from one end to the other  
of the glorious, verdant chain  
that glistens in the azure sea.

By blood,  
by bone,  
by might,  
by fear,  
by will,  
he ruled it all—  
the massive,  
mighty,  
dark,  
courageous one—  
the King.

## **Durham Cathedral**

*Durham, England—1983*

At Durham Cathedral, atop the highest hill—  
the mass of stone that rises solid, up to heaven,  
up to touch the sky above the moors,  
where stark-white moon floats cold and sere  
to cast its eerie shadows on the bells  
that hang aloft, above the darkened tomb—  
it's there we tread upon the marble stones  
encasing Cuthbert's heart—  
the meekest heart,  
the embattled bones they secreted away—  
hid from the Norsemen, 'til the time  
they could be sanctified, and buried here  
on hallowed ground.

What conscience drove his quiet heart to  
dedicate itself to that great trust  
at Lindesfarne—  
perched lonely on the great North Sea,  
austere, defenseless—save but for their faith?

Devoted servant to his work—  
he braved the lonely perils of his calling,  
suffered death,  
and yet was lifted up,  
exalted by apostles . . .  
the relics of his life

preserved and hid  
until the day  
that he was canonized,  
and laid to rest—  
rests here, in Durham Cathedral.

He sleeps—  
the bells toll slowly—  
evening,  
then the night.

He sleeps—  
the stark white moon  
floats silently above the stones,  
above the massive monument to faith  
that rises suddenly and solid  
on the highest hill.

Above the tower,  
above the moors,  
the cold, pure globe floats,  
clear and white.

Below the marble stones  
he lies—  
stark-white,  
bleached clean  
and sanctified.

## Molly's Field

*Catterick Garrison, North Yorkshire, England—1984*

In the evening, after tea,  
we take Molly to the field  
that lies at the top  
of Rawlinson Road.

She pulls on the lead  
    all the way up.  
She will not heel  
    on the way to the field.

The field is several acres big.  
Around its edge old fir trees stand—  
    big, black-green fir trees,  
    all in line around its edge,  
    stand just the same throughout the year,  
        in every year,  
        for all the years . . .  
    stand firm like silent spectators,  
    stand all around the edge,  
    stand firm where they hold to the earth,  
        yet wave their tops to back and forth,  
            to back and forth in the cold, north wind.

The fir trees nod, to back and forth  
    when Molly is loosed from her golden lead  
    at the edge of the fir-tree field.

They nod, again, to back and forth  
when she runs out, in the vast, open space.

In the winter, they nod, to back and forth,  
when the frosted winds  
blow all across  
the vast, open space.

They nod and bow, to back and forth,  
when cloud-scattered moonbeams  
glance off the surface,  
when curtains of crystals  
sand over the field,  
whip up the white dust,  
skim quickly across,  
race swiftly with Molly.

They nod and bow to back and forth  
when weightless, blonde Molly,  
in all her soft lightness,  
becomes just a shadow—  
becomes an impression—  
in the far-away moonlit distance.

They nod, back and forth,  
when we fasten the lead,  
and take Molly—  
heeling—  
home from the field.

## **Lindesfarne**

*Holy Island, Northumberland, England—1984*

They edged the shapes in sharp black angles,  
poured their hearts out in triangles—

blazing red and orange and yellow—

curled the edges up, around, down, up again.

they pulled their faith out to the end,

the limit,

to illuminate the Word.

The Word, a heard thing,

wrought by penance,

by denial,

into dazzling patterns,

brilliant rhythms,

perfect meters,

fitted fourths and fifths and forms

that blaze across the page.

The pages vibrate with conviction,

Celtic order, peace, and love that passeth understanding

Faith had prayed for understanding

through the chaos,

through the death

that swept, raw, stark, and swift,

across the dark North Sea.

Faith sustained the battered hearts  
past the rough, cruel, blazing pain,  
beyond the torn page,  
pillaged icons,  
shattered silence,  
broken world.

Death would crush the quiet hands, the reverent hearts  
that worked the art,  
but could not crush the souls of faith, of love—  
and could not dim the light that shines  
in their immortal pages.

## **Stirling**

*Stirling, Scotland 1985*

In Stirling, on a football Saturday,  
I passed my life at the train station  
where those who passed their lives in factories  
lived for the play-offs,  
lived the rivalry,  
backed up the timetable,  
ransacked the trains,  
"hooligan-ed" their way back to Aberdeen.

Eng-land!

Scot-land!

It's not life and death,

but, mate, we can dream!

## **The Dark River**

*Glencoe, Scotland—1985*

In its season,  
the dark river  
swells and boils down from the highlands,  
moves swiftly past the places etched in history,  
flows fiercely through the battle-scars they carved—  
down past Loch Leven to Loch Linnhe  
and to the sea beyond.

Out on the heath,  
where bagpipes played their plaintive song  
to sing the brave into their graves,  
to honor fallen patriots of Glencoe,  
gave voice to their great sadness at the loss  
of Scotland's bravest men,  
its purest women.

Across the heath,  
into the Highlands—  
stung by the sharpest bite of winter,  
warmed by the fiercest courage ever known—  
the bagpipes played their folk hymn  
down the glens  
into the hearts of Scots  
forever after.

The river swells, and rolls, and boils  
black-brown with snow-washed heath  
that footed those fierce struggles—  
brutal butcheries  
enacted in the name of subtle difference—  
horrific crimes done  
as revenge,  
retaliation,  
eye-for-eye,  
for passion's deeds of eons past.

The river swells.  
The river boils down  
past Loch Leven, past Loch Linnhe,  
beyond the Loch—out to the sea beyond—  
beyond the endless passion,  
before, beyond, forever,  
whether passion grows or wanes.

The river swells and boils down from the highlands,  
in its season.

## The Ice Man

*Schofield Barracks, Hawaii—1986*

(German Press Agency)

Merano, Italy — The body of a World War I soldier, which had spent 70 years moving down a glacier in the Italian Alps, has been recovered and taken for burial, authorities said Thursday.

The uniform of the Austro-Hungarian soldier was still in good condition. A still-legible note in a pocket read:

"In the event of my death, notify my mother, 5th District, Vienna."

The man, whose identity was not given, had been born in 1874, according to a tag around his neck.

The Honolulu Advertiser

Friday, July 18, 1986

Still,  
silent,  
asleep,  
frozen in time,  
the Ice Man floated . . .  
    patiently  
    peacefully,  
slid quietly . . .  
    carefully,  
slipped cautiously . . .  
    down.

Inch by inch,  
it shifted—  
so slowly—  
    the massive,  
    boulder-grinding,  
    mountain-carving  
    river of ice,

made not a sound  
in its pure-cold,  
sterile bathing  
of the life he gave.

Descending,

he passed calmly  
over snow-shrouded crevasses—  
fathomless caverns that reached  
from thick, frigid air,  
past steel-slick gray walls,  
through the layers of silt,  
stacked in eons  
on skeletons  
of billions of sea creatures—  
to granite substrata,  
slow-cooled into dazzling  
crystallized masses,  
over firepits of lava  
that shift  
the face  
of Earth.

Reclining,

where he last fell,  
seventy winters ago,

where he last looked

at painted-on streaks of cloud

against an infinite sky,

where he last breathed

the smells of verdant Earth and tree and grass,

where he last felt

chill air that forced the tiny hairs upright and formed

ice crystals in his nose;

Carried on the icy carpet,

under season's changing covers,

swaddled in soft blankets of Earth's snow,

in the valley of her mountains,

she caressed him to her bosom—

rocked him, gently, to eternity.

## **Kaena Point**

*Waialua, Hawaii—1987*

Late at night they walk into the dark,  
into the sea that  
flings itself against the steep North Shore.

Eerie, transparent things  
they march, determined.  
Do not interfere!  
They march straight from the Point into the sea —  
into the vast, dark sea  
in search of their lost home,  
their Polynesia—  
to their history,  
away into the night,  
into the sea,  
they march—  
fade into far away—  
the ghosts of the Hawaiians.

## The Book

*Austin Peay State University, Clarksville, Tennessee 1990*

I am your book

bound in wine-colored leather,  
named by golden letters on my spine—  
a spine marked off by leather ribs  
that separate my name from my creator's.

Lift me.

Hold me.

Press your broad, strong hands against my supple cover.

Stroke your fingers down the ridges of my spine.

Know my name and choose to open me.

See the marbleizing colors vibrate secretly  
inside my quiet cover—  
my quiet cover that contains  
their pulsing, swirling dance.

Watch the dance.

Feel the dance that draws you in,  
that pulls you ever inward to my treasure.

Wander down, at first, from my first page—  
from my first pure-white page  
where firm, black letters etch the sure-set works,  
the words that boldly pull  
the thoughts from my creator's head

and string them here upon my flesh—  
expose them here  
for you.

Respond to me.

Accept my open invitation,  
my willing invitation  
that opens me to you.

Open to me—

open to a page that leads you down  
into my deep-within,  
deep within the place  
where my reality  
replaces yours.

Follow your eyes.

Follow your hungry eyes  
that now devour my words,  
that now feast upon the banquet of my words—  
my words that spread before you, freely,  
thoughts . . .  
imaginings . . .  
revelations.

Devour these thoughts.

Read me.

Know me.

Know the thoughts I hold—

the thoughts that lead beyond me  
through the vortex of our union,  
through the angle where  
your story  
intersects with mine—  
the thoughts that will forevermore  
have changed the course you'll follow—  
changed it slightly  
or exceedingly

I am your book.

## **In the Fireflies' Valley**

*Ft. Campbell, Kentucky—1990*

They left on bikes, late.

They knew this Army post—  
on bikes they learned it.

Dusk was a restless time

for boys about to close the door on boyhood.

They went outside my sensing . . .

disappeared on the horizon,  
concealed whatever secrets they adventured

beyond the length of time that ran from goodbye to hello.

Hours later . . .

in full darkness,  
in excitement,  
the smooth stripe of tires peeled up the driveway.

Hurried, shuffling, breathless . . .

flushed, they brought the thrilled words up to share:

"You have to see it—we found a place . . .  
a forest that looks like . . . Christmas!  
Come and see!"

I followed them there,  
where the sliver of moon  
described paint flakes

on the backs  
of vacant barracks.

Behind the buildings  
we waded into a  
silent, slight valley,  
where the dark evergreen world rose up.

As we passed within it  
there were revealed,  
suspended there,  
in nets of imagination,  
like drops of liquid silver spilled,  
trailing abundantly  
from upsweeping limbs,  
glittering creatures  
scattering their silver light  
beneath the sky.

A multitude of fireflies  
filled the hidden forest—  
illuminated a place of wonder,  
dazzling the eye  
with their surprising,  
silent night display.

## **The Wild Duck**

*Clarksville, Tennessee—1990*

The Wild Duck wanders through my dreams,  
where life and death are only different  
versions of the insane theme  
that rattles in my head.

And in the dream,  
as Ibsen and I  
traveled, headlong,  
beyond the pall,  
things brightened—  
faded, really.

Everything went silent, still.  
We traveled on as if  
nothing had happened.

That was the strangest part of it.  
There was no sound.  
We floated through the alter world.

I thought:

"What a shame.

Now we won't finish

the fence we started on last spring,  
won't taste the first strawberries,  
won't curse at all the traffic,

won't slam the big front door,  
and won't sleep in anymore."

Then the Wild Duck walked in—  
walked into my death dream—  
and Ibsen and I  
stole away on a new  
train of thought  
that passes its life in my head.

## **Dream of Disappearance**

*Austin, Texas—1990*

On the last night of life,  
with Steven Hawking talking in my ear,  
I tip-toed 'round  
the sharp secret edge  
of an event horizon,  
thinking that,  
beyond this place,  
a slender thread of time  
ties yesterday to  
where Earth ends,  
its edges falling off in silent space, where eternity spreads out its infinite field.

I had walked there every night before,  
chancing, deftly balancing  
along the slender thread that runs between the here and hyper-magnetism.  
staying slightly beyond  
the imminent circle  
of massive, suffocating, final gravity  
gravity so strong that light cannot escape it.

Always before,  
the thin young scientist appeared  
and peered through thick eye-glasses,  
knowingly, assuringly  
explaining quantum theory—  
cautioning me

about the heavy blackness of the hole—  
before he faded back into the world  
of public access television.

On the last night,  
he wasn't there,  
and in a slight, unguarded nano-second,  
my thoughts skipped out, unchaperoned, to somewhere else.

Skipped vigilance,  
slipped footing,  
life slipped away,  
slid down,  
sucked deep into the mega-heavy inner world,  
the nemesis of "out there" — outer space,  
that place — the black hole — hoarding all its captured light  
inside its radical, complete, and absolute,  
its crushing, suffocating end.

Its force was such,  
that when it collapsed all over me,  
I imploded and became  
a naked singularity —  
free . . . gone,  
and with me,  
my history,  
and any clue  
that I had ever lived.

## **The Architecture Building**

*The University of Texas at Austin—1990*

Walk through the architecture building.

Walk across the West Mall on paving stones bleached light  
by the sun of one hundred years—  
one stone is loose from its mortar lining,  
hollow-sounding.

Pass beside the walkway walls embedded with seashell prints  
where prehistoric sea creatures lay themselves to rest  
eons ago.  
Fit your fingers into the seashell prints.  
Feel the even ridges formed by even, ancient shells.

Move your hand lightly across the polished red granite  
of the north wall.  
Touch the hard, cold surface of the granite,  
slow-cooled from Earth's molten layer,  
intruded hot into underground spaces.

Look through the concave cubes of amber glass that outline  
the entrance.  
See the golden, curving images of within through  
silken-honey windows.  
Watch the lines and angles bend to fit the warming view.

Pull the massive oaken door to open inner unto outer.

Break the seal between nature raw and nature ripe.

Weigh the wooden heaviness of the acorn's solid fruit,  
grown and watered in some primeval forest,  
formed through summers and frozen winters that  
marked their numbers in its heart—

its heart now open to your hand.

Pass your hand across the heart that lived within the tree.

Hear the dry leaves of living trees scatter in across the threshold.

Feel the rush of air that pushes in ahead of you  
to fill the silent halls.

Breathe the hurried winds of autumn that sweep down  
the great-hall canyons—

seep in, rush in to quiet places where they  
wrap around the echoes,  
pad the sound of echoes,  
silence the silence inside.

Step in upon the fitted slate stones, spread out beneath your feet,

that trace the walkways through the building.

Walk upon that dark blue rock, that green one.

Follow their paving of emerald and black.

Tread firmly over cerulean sheets of Earth

laid carefully out, spanning your path,

awaiting your footsteps' pattern.

Look down the windowed corridor where sunlight pours  
through tile-lined arches of glass.  
Watch slick green marble squares  
string the prisms into a rope of colored light  
that reaches from where you are  
to every doorway.

Move into pools of soft brightness that pour around  
plaster ceiling circle edges—  
open, oak-trimmed semi-circles lifting up the roof  
to shed down creamy light where hallways intersect.

Close your eyes.

Inhale the planet.  
Breathe deeply—  
fill your lungs with  
the rich, wooden oak and the ash,  
fill yourself with the forest,  
smell Earth itself,  
the primitive clays of creation  
in the mortar and the plaster;  
savor the aroma of art,  
the scent of man's genius,  
in the oils of the exhibit hall.

Walk through the architecture building.

## **Assimilation**

*Austin, Texas—1991*

A slender, dark student from India  
wore a forest-green shirt  
from a delicatessen.

On the front, the shirt said, simply:

“Schlotzsky’s,”

on the back:

“The Best Buns in Town.”

I walked behind him  
down the West Mall,  
on the way to find my car,  
and wondered how far he’d been assimilated.

We passed an enclave  
of dark men and women  
who spoke in the lilting,  
musical style—  
whose words ran all over, all around the scale.

One woman said:

“Are you coming along to the Indian dinner tonight?”

One man answered:

“No, I’ll not be there . . . I very much tire of these things.”

I thought of the Raj, of the Taj Mahal—  
thought of Ghandi, Indira, Panchatantras and mantras.

I wanted to speak,  
to say, "You *must* go.  
There are plenty of us here.  
We want you to be  
what you always have been . . .  
Indian!"

But I didn't.

Instead,  
I just walked  
behind the dark man  
with the Best Buns in Town  
to the church parking lot  
where he passed through the gate.

As I climbed in my car,  
I saw him unlock  
a great, big American V-8.

## **Blue Ladies**

*Austin, Texas—1991*

At the "Eye Center"  
diseased eyes gather  
for transplantation—  
plastic lenses or  
someone else's corneas.

At the "Eye Center"  
diseased old people gather  
to wait  
for new eyes.  
Some have patched eyes.  
Some have tearing eyes.  
All will have better eyes,  
if they can just wait.

Many young women  
move among the old people,  
directing and sorting them,  
smiling—pretending  
to answer their questions.

All the young women  
wear baby-blue tunics  
and baby-blue skirts,  
wrapped at the waists  
with baby-blue scarves.

Their eyelids are powdered  
with baby-blue shadow,  
uncannily dusted  
in precise semi-circles.  
Their lips are outlined  
in ruby-red pencil,  
filled with ruby-red lipstick  
to form full, pleasant smiles.  
Behind the red lips  
are sparkling white teeth—  
orthodontically-straight—  
for correctly sweet smiles.

All the blue ladies care  
(they tell all the old people),  
care that the patients  
are comfy and calm—  
comfy and calm  
while they wait for their eye parts:  
"Stay comfy and calm,  
you'll be seen before long."

The many blue ladies  
with ruby-red lips  
and sparkling white teeth  
and baby-blue eye shadow  
wheel each of the old people  
to lens-measuring machines.  
They speak slowly and loudly,

smile broadly but falsely,  
they explain and apologize  
for the lengthy delays.

"We're sorry for the delay,  
but the doctors are busy,  
and you old people are not.

All you old people will wait.  
All the waits will be long."  
All the ladies are blue.

## Venice

*Venice, Italy—1994*

A ghostly moon sails silently through night clouds  
strung above decaying posts,  
eroded by the Grand Canal.

The white-flecked water's feeble laps  
belie the rush of tides  
of conquerors and kings and carnivals—  
clutch fleeting memories of the glory days.

The rotting pier posts,  
molding stones  
that felt the surge of history's forceful flood,  
now feel the languid wash  
of careless tides into the streets,  
while vacant, passive monuments to Doges  
hover empty at their moorings.

The moon of centuries ago  
reflected brilliant light on that ambitious time.  
The mask, the pensive frown  
shines on the Campanile—  
on domes that capture shadows of Byzantium,  
on horses tethered high above the square—  
shines on the lion of Saint Mark—  
alighting once,  
its wings outspread,

it lingers through eternity,  
secured upon its massive perch,  
still staring towards the sea —  
off Santa Giorgio, eerie, empty entry,  
off Rialto,  
off the lonely Bridge of Sighs that cloistered doomed from day.

The moon of centuries ago,  
was dazzled by Venetian splendor—  
brilliance that obscured its face—  
now glints off platforms at the station,  
shines on throngs of people  
strewn across the marble steps,  
shines through the eyes of those who come  
to see  
to feel  
to be  
in Venice.

## **Eternal City**

*Rome, Italy 1994*

Trains scream down the tracks beside the platforms at Termini.  
The smell of hot steel mingles with the clamor of the crowds  
just past what we have kept of Minerva's Temple—  
obscured by wires and tracks—but kept, the same.

Midday on the Palatine,  
feral cats crawl under shades of stones  
that harbored Caesar's Rome.

The temple of Venus and Roma blazes on the hill  
and distance dances in waves of heat  
past a noiseless Circus Maximus.  
Dry grass blankets the unused arena  
where chariots raced for two hundred thousand fans,  
and the Tibur threads languidly, still,  
among the seven hills.

We order pizza  
and watch the late sun set  
behind the Colosseum,  
as it did centuries ago.  
There, victims of the boredom—  
arms, legs pulled asunder and devoured—  
washed the paving stones with blood,  
their soft flesh shredded by exotic beasts  
for curiosity.

Thumbs up, thumbs down,  
the masses fed on violence and fear,  
on bread and circuses.

We walk along, and walk upon  
the ancient stones, the walls that stand in ruins,  
the rocks that hang on faces fallen off to time.  
Icons and monuments loom up  
beyond the blaze of night streets' noise and motion—  
appear, to witness us.

In Rome, the silent, ancient wonders  
witness history.  
The crumbling, ravaged sentinels  
refuse to step aside.  
They mark their places—  
stick their stony feet in time—  
and force their legends through the centuries.

## **The Somme**

*Somme River Valley, France—1994*

At twilight we zip past  
the untroubled country.

We raise a glass  
to toast our tour of Paris.

Now, what's next?

We laugh—the carefree laugh of visitors  
who catch a brief, quaint snapshot  
of a place, so far away and strange.

Outside, the Somme flies past our train.

November—plowing season:  
stacked here and there are little piles  
of odd-shaped metal pieces—  
relics of the war to end all wars.

In every year thereafter  
Earth still offers up these fruits,  
reminders of what went before.

That time of fervent patriots  
who loved the land,  
signed up together—  
regiments of friends.  
The Clerks of White Star Cotton Company  
signed up as a platoon.  
Welsh miners, short but healthy,  
formed a special Bantam Unit.

Mechanics were the "Pals,"  
the bankers were the "Chums,"  
together they signed up for duty,  
joining regulars in the Somme.  
That summer they left, together—  
left the warmth of their families and homes—  
for the sake of their own and the lives that they cherished,  
they adventured into the unknown.

From England and Ireland, Scotland and Wales,  
an entire generation of men  
poured from the towns throughout the realm  
to the Valley near Amiens.  
To the valley of their untimely deaths—  
to the valley of no return—  
they marched beside their childhood friends  
to the cadence of German guns.

Death was not selective,  
it swept up brave and meek,  
in rows of muddy, bloody graves  
it stacked them up in heaps.

Among the ravaged regiments  
were the Irish Fusiliers,  
their Armagh, Monaghan, and Caban Battalions  
realized their greatest fears.

The Newfoundlanders sustained the loss

of every officer,  
and only one from every three  
of their noble men endured.

The metal shells assaulted  
Inniskilling's Fusiliers;  
like their ancestors at Waterloo,  
they fell beside their peers.

The Twelfth Yorks and Lancasters  
who led the dread attack,  
were winnowed, killed, and buried—  
not found 'til four months passed.

They fell in trenches, died in battle—  
twenty thousand that first day,  
twenty thousand the first few minutes  
had passed their lives away.

The citizen soldiers—  
the sons and the brothers,  
the husbands, the fathers,  
the best Britain offered,  
the victims of that,  
the cruelest harvest,  
they all met their deaths in the Somme.

And year after year,  
the cold, languid river

courses its valley, now fertile from blood  
of the brave men who fell there  
so far from their homes.

The Somme still flows past  
the untroubled country  
that witnessed their deaths,  
their loneliest hour,  
the end of their briefest,  
bright time on the Earth.

At twilight we zip past  
the untroubled country—  
we laugh, catch a glimpse  
of the Valley of the Somme—  
past the odd piles of metal,  
in quiet, green pastures,  
past the haunted remains  
of the ghosts of the Somme.

## **The Cow**

*Riverview, Florida 1996*

The cow minds not the sameness of its days—  
the grazing, chewing, sleeping, swatting sameness—  
minds not the seeming sameness—day by day.

The cow minds not,  
no, does not mind,  
but rather likes it,  
very near embraces it,  
adores the sameness,  
rejoices in ennui!

But does so, boringly.

## **Sandhill Cranes**

*Thonotossassa, Florida—1996*

Rattling calls come close—  
their great, long, lumbering bodies  
lift easily on strong, wide wings  
and carry them away, aloft  
a-rattling—  
eerily,  
beyond the pond we keep for them;  
every evening to return, the pair—  
from who knows where—  
from swamp to lake,  
to quiet themselves for another night,  
together for all time.

## Night Heron

*Alafia River, Florida—1996*

The night heron does not flock,  
but lives alone—  
his plaintive call unheeded  
by the others of his recluse lot.  
He does not flock,  
but gazes always at the water—  
vigilant, extreme,  
his body poised—ungainly,  
neck outstretched,  
the beak, an awkward arrow to the pond—  
waiting for the slightest glint  
of scale or fin  
to plunge his dagger beak into the water  
and fish his prey out,  
wet and shining—  
so to grasp  
brief pause  
from his obsessive hunt—  
(but not to flock)  
to gaze again—  
so vigilant,  
extreme,  
ungainly,  
and alone.

## **The Frog**

*Brandon, Florida 1996*

What about the frog?

Nights, he sits stone-still by the porch-light.

Perfect.

Dinner is served.

Days, he sticks up in the tiny porch-top corner,  
a piece of Silly Putty:

soft,

green,

and slick,

low-profile,

still—

unnoticed . . .

please!

## The Ibis

*Myakka River, Florida 1997*

The ibis is a worker—  
works all day—  
its long, curved beak probes gumbo clay,  
the soil concealing insects, worms, and crawfish—  
works all day,  
works all day long,  
its long beak pokes and probes,  
and on and on,  
and all day long.

The ibis works unmindful of the traffic.  
The ibis works unmindful of the other birds.  
*You* may be interested,  
upset,  
involved!  
It matters not.  
The ibis is unmindful of your state.  
He has his work to do.

The ibis probes and walks  
and walks and probes.  
The ibis is a worker—  
Works all day.

## **The Great Red Face**

*Brandon, Florida—1997*

In the morning  
the great red canine face  
intrudes upon my sleep—  
a velvet face that features  
two great liquid pools of playfulness,  
that sparkle with the force  
that drives the great red dog  
to ever watch for every opportunity,  
a look, a move, a sound,  
that hints of sport or play.

The great red face is not without a ball  
within the great red mouth  
that's lined with big, white teeth.  
The ball escapes the mouth when things are dull—  
escapes or falls within the grasp of *trolls* that live  
beneath the bed, the chairs, the sofa, everywhere—  
*trolls* that take the ball to make a sport of finding it.

The great red dog that lives to play  
cannot be bothered with too much of petting,  
too much of silly talk, too quiet of a day.

The great red face will lie beside the quiet times  
and wait until the slightest cue  
announces time to play.

The great red velvet dog  
remains so vigilant, so true to play,  
so loyal to the life of sport,  
yet sleeps so big, and waits so long  
until companions come again  
to throw the ball and play.

## **The Pelican**

*Tampa Bay, Florida—1997*

The pelican dares us to drive the causeway  
as fast as he can fly—  
dares us—  
flies,  
soars without a wing stir—  
then dares us.

Unfettered by terrain,  
he flies where he will . . .  
pulls his massive beak back,  
dives straight down  
to fish his breakfast from the bay

Pterodactyl soaring—  
pterosoaring pelicans.

## **The Black-Top Rockets**

*Interstate Highway 75, Florida 1997*

The Black-Top Rockets  
pumped a 12-beat rock  
and rolled all through my car  
as I sped past  
the fogged-out bridge  
over Moccasin Wallow Creek . . .  
pumped the 12-beat rhythm  
that blues the sunrise  
coming over Wimauma . . .  
that spices up  
the Southern mists  
that rise up slow  
and smack me right between the eyes,  
while a shiny black  
Kennilworth trails back  
behind my rear-view mirror,  
and I rocket past  
on a black-top arc  
from dreamland into day.



## Vita

Sylvia L. Griffith was born in Galveston, Texas on March 29, 1948. She completed high school in Columbus, Texas, was awarded a National Merit Scholarship, and earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature from the University of Houston in 1970. She worked as a writer, program administrator, technical writer, and instructor in English, mathematics, and science over the following 27 years, while she accompanied her husband and their two sons to numerous U.S. and international military assignments. She began her graduate studies at Austin Peay State University in 1989 and was inducted into The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi in 1990. She added course work at The University of Texas at Austin and the University of South Florida in Tampa, and completed the Master of Arts degree in English, with honors, in 1997. Following two years as a Senior Information Developer and Field Services Manager for CTG (Computer Task Group) in Tampa, she became an independent consultant.