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CLEFT

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
Drama and Communications
in
The Creative Writing Workshop

by

Robin Kemp

B. A., Georgia State University, 1994

December 2002

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
FENCE-HOPPING: AN INTRODUCTION	1
DEDICATION	9
CLEFT	
Articulation	11
I.	
Hunted Heart	13
Climbing.....	14
What I Wanted to Tell You.....	15
Lock-Out	16
Throw Me Something.....	17
Echo Calls Narcissus.....	18
Courting the Lion.....	19
Conceit #1: Valentine.....	20
Petal in My Pocket.....	21
Melisma	22
Kissing in the Carwash	23
Dreaming of Your Hair.....	24
Closed for Your Convenience	25
II.	
Pelican Sonnet.....	27
Patrons' Dinner by Invitation Only.....	28
Has-Beens Qualify.....	30
Poems In and Near the Prison Museum.....	31
III.	
That Magic Pill You've Heard So Much About.....	33
Southern Heritage	34
Adopting the Master's Tongue.....	35
Cleft.....	37
New Breast	40
Reply to My Niece After 9/11.....	41
Red Moon.....	43
VITA.....	44

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FENCE-HOPPING: AN INTRODUCTION

Robert Frost said of writing free verse, “I’d rather play tennis without a net.” As a child growing up on South Claiborne Avenue in New Orleans, I lived much of my interior life outdoors, in my backyard cherry tree and on the adjacent fields of Tulane University. Sometimes, I would hop the hurricane fence and walk down a shell road that led to the old racquetball courts. There I heard satisfying music: the thunking, popping, and ringing of rubber balls, fired from racquets and rebounding from walls, ceilings, and floors. Sound became, for me, three-dimensional, almost tactile. Those musical courts, like so much else in the city I call home, are long-gone; yet their thunks and pings echo as loudly as ever.

For an athlete, the tool of expression can be a racquet, a ball, a court, a net. For a painter, the tool can be paint, canvas, wood, a brush, a knife. I use many tools to shape and color my poems. Sometimes I choose formal devices, particularly the sonnet. Other times, I let my ear be my guide – trying to catch the subtle syncopations of everyday speech, playing with the ends of lines, usually breaking them at the phrase or clause, but pushing the end of the sentence into a new line in an attempt to keep the poem’s momentum going. Poetry is my medium for trying to examine and express the truths of my life as I understand them.

Sometimes this search for truth involves inner reflection. Other times, it requires that I try to understand “the other” as best as I can. Of necessity, the understanding I have sometimes changes as the poem passes through time and revisions. I feel that a poem is “done,” or at least as done as it can be, when it is published. By the same token, I am reluctant to publish too much too quickly, because I hope that my work as a whole is still growing, even after graduation. What this thesis represents is a vision that, like an individual style of painting, I hope to refine over a lifetime.

I write in both formal and “free” verse (or what H. T. Kirby-Smith rightly calls “organic form”), and I see the distinction as analogous to proficiency in more than one musical idiom, as classical and jazz. Free verse is like jazz: a casually stated theme emphasizing diverse variations on sound and rhythm. Similarly, so-called “formal” poetry is like classical music: emphasizing a strict theme restated in several subtle variations. Both jazz and classical pieces succeed or fail based on the individual artist’s composition, interpretation, and/or performance (whether she plays an oral or print instrument). Accurate execution of musical score, or of poetic meter, may indicate technical proficiency; without musicianship – that combination of taste, timing, experience, practice, talent, and “ear” – the work will fail to move its audience. Perhaps it will come as no surprise that my sense of artistic training as a discipline came originally from music. Writing was something I just “did” and, in that sense, I took it for granted.

The sonnet, or “little song,” is the English language’s most venerable poetic form, one that is derived from the Italian and has roots in the Greek lyric mode. I have a special interest in the sonnet, not only for its musicality but also for its almost essay-like rhetorical structure that forces me to slow down and think through a problem. The core sonnets in Cleft represent a small selection of over 50 sonnets that I have written during the past few years. While most of these follow the Elizabethan pattern, I also employ envelope stanzas within the Shakespearean form, as well as Italian sonnets with varying sestets. (There is also a villanelle, meant as an *apologia* for that much-maligned medication, Prozac, which has empowered me to exercise greater control over my life and thus my poetry.)

My attitude towards formal poetics echoes that of friends and colleagues Annie Finch and Kathrine Varnes, as detailed in their recent anthology An Exaltation of Forms: “by including both exploratory and traditional forms. . . . [we] hope to open a discussion

about form that cuts across poetic movements, which have for too long either ignored or distorted each others' insights and expertise" (2). Both Finch and Varnes embrace this multiplicity of being, but they apply the concept to poetic form itself. I find their willingness to consider organic form seriously to be a sturdy bridge between New Formalism and the more experimental and "non-academic" schools of poetry. Such willingness to hear, to learn, and to understand can make poetry (and other cloven territory) stronger at its broken places.

Why do I make such heavy use of the sonnet form – blending casual diction with musically-considered substitutions, but with strict attention to end-rhyme? I use the sonnet's conventionality to hem in and order the sometimes confusing and wild passions that the material addresses. Writing about and through the desperate fear of abandonment that is lost love's self-fulfilling prophecy, as in "Lock-Out," or mourning for the irreparable cleft between self and lover as in "Courting the Lion" or "Echo Calls Narcissus," is red-hot territory. For me as a poet, the material of "Southern Heritage" is almost too hot to handle: family, politics, racism all rolled into one. Adrienne Rich has asserted that her training in form gave her the "asbestos gloves" she needed to handle such hot subject matter, especially in her later, less-formal poetry. Form insulates me and gives me the grounding I need to hop electrified fences.

Marilyn Hacker's work, especially in Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons, resonates deeply with me. Her world of lesbian romance and casual-yet-smart diction inhabits the traditional sonnet form in much the way a strikingly beautiful woman can wear a man's silk suit:

. . . . Don't sling
that out with Friday's beer cans, or file-card it
in a drawer of anecdotes: "My Last
Six Girlfriends: How a Girl Acquires a Past."
I've got "What Becomes of the Broken-Hearted"
run on a loop, unwanted leitmotif.

Lust, light, love, life all tumbled into grief.
 You closed us like a parenthesis
 and left me knowing just enough to miss (210).

Many of the love sonnets here, I hope, are a modest tribute to the spirit that inhabits Hacker's sonnets. I sense her influence in poems such as "Climbing," where I fought long and hard against the notion of breaking a word to suit meter and end-rhyme, a device Hacker uses in several of her poems. It seemed unnatural, a wrenching, none too subtle. Yet the more I pondered it, the hyphen seemed to go with the music, the form, the line break, the jagged edges of the cliff face, the visual precipice of a falling-off line. Something as small as the hyphen at the end of line seven ("tug tight until they catch. Such slim protec- / tion, clipped, to faith, is safest when it's slack", ll. 7-8) flashes like neon graffiti in my mind:

HACKER WAS HERE!

For the most part, however, I think her influence is that of a similar tone in poems such as "Throw Me Something" and "What I Wanted to Tell You," poems that are meant to examine the intricacies of falling in and out of love.

Part of that falling involves the negotiation of the zone between self and other. The title, "What I Wanted to Tell You," signals that the speaker is looking back after the fact, imagining a different outcome than what really happened. Giving oneself to a lover is perhaps the most intimate act between two people: it involves both transcendence and transgression of physical and spiritual boundaries.

Nature's tendency is towards decay, despite man's best efforts to construct artificial divides; Frost also wrote, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." A barrier (a wall, a fence) is a presence. A gap (a cleft) is an absence. These seeming opposites both serve the same function: division. The Romantic poets were fascinated by the idea of division.

Contemporary attitudes toward feminism and racism also are based on the dialectical notion

of self and other. Theorize it any way you want to: the practical application of such theories remains that of division. Is division in and of itself good or bad? Perhaps not. Perhaps the “good fence” of form makes good neighbors by allowing each side to claim space. In the end, such a barrier is temporal and illusory.

Perhaps form is less well suited to managing a gaping absence. Sometimes the very thing that protects can also confine—in which case, I hop the fence and try life on the less-formal side. Poetic material doesn’t get any hotter than in “Cleft”: abandonment, helplessness, embarrassment, insanity, violence, and irrefutable proof that love cannot conquer all. Like its namesake, “Cleft” is an anomaly: the hottest emotional material, in some ways, yet the least formal of the poems in the collection. Some poems, like some children, simply refuse to be caged.

The least traditionally formal and closest thing to a performance piece represented in this collection is “New Breast”. Repetition of the simple conjunction “and” serves as both unifying and mimetic device—it mimics the speaker’s sobs of sorrow for her mother and the grief at possibly losing her to cancer. Feminist poet-scholar Alicia Suskin Ostriker reminds us of “the feminist conviction that the personal is political” (16), and links it to performance poetry in feminist and spiritual rituals. In ritual poetry, which Ostriker characterizes as chant-like, the poet becomes shaman, “enacting a modern version of the theme of transformation common to tribal ceremonies in ancient Europe, Britain, America, and Africa” (16-17). The speaker in “New Breast” is chanting for her mother’s life, chanting for her to come through the experience, chanting her praises.

Future direction for my work is likely to include more organic form. I hope to explore more dialects, in order to speak faithfully and respectfully through a multiplicity of voices. The overarching idea I see for a future, book-length version of Cleft is changing focal

length over time: from the solipsistic and self-absorbed, which is only a starting point, outward to more universal human concerns such as planetary survival. I envision “Cleft” as the free-verse hinge on which future poems will turn.

For me, it is not enough merely to recognize that conflict and uncertainty exist. How do we move through it? The only way I can figure it out is by looking through the other’s lens. Sometimes I try to do so within a single poem, as in “Adopting the Master’s Tongue,” where the speaker sees three clashing points of view at once: the crazy brother, “his fish-white face / stitched together like Frankenstein’s” asserting white privilege over the black guest who drops his gaze and guitar, and the speaker, whose shock at her brother’s misrepresentation renders her powerless to enunciate her own beliefs (“that word / locks a clamp on my tongue”).

Race itself is necessarily an issue in my work because I am a Southerner. I think that cultural responses to one’s place in a given set of race relations do indeed impact one’s art. I do not believe that biology is destiny. I do believe that part of the reason why my poetics are so multifaceted is that my cultural heritage (not merely my DNA) is, too.

I look, function socially as, and by percentage am “white,” being mostly English, Scots-Irish, and German, among other things. I also am of the first generation of Southerners who knew only integrated schools, streetcars, theaters, and other public accommodations. As such, I have been both victim and perpetrator of many small unkindnesses, often unwittingly so. Like Toi Derricotte, a light-skinned mixed-race poet who identifies as black, I am mistaken for everything but who I am. I retain just enough of a biological trace – high cheekbones, arrowhead nose, dark skin that disguises my “whiteness,” chameleon-like, under intense sun—to hint at my Mohawk heritage.

I attempt to address the racial divide in works like “Southern Heritage” (“*Confedrit* uncle. . . I ain’t white. Are you?”), “Adopting the Master’s Tongue” (“Do you still smell that word, / burning like a cross / in my locked mouth?”) and in “Poems In and Near the Prison Museum,” which begins with the great blues singer Leadbelly reduced to a number, a “Colored” number at that, notable only for the “10 Lashes—Laziness” and “15 Lashes—Impudence” he received, not for the fact that he was “Discharged August 1, 1934” after winning the governor’s pardon based on his musical talent.

I agree with Derricotte, who writes, “[G]iven the history of racism, at least as far as I was concerned, no relationship between blacks and whites will be genuine unless it can bear and bare anger, that bearing and baring anger is the real test of whether a relationship will last” (120). The same is true of any cleft between people—whether lovers, people of the same or of different races, even warring parts of the self.

Ignorance of one’s own history, being divided from oneself, is a killing proposition. Nowhere is this more apparent than in “Cleft,” the title poem of this collection. Lacking this sense of identity, lacking belief in his inherent human worth, was the root of many of my brother Patrick’s problems. Lack of timely nurturing set off a dangerous—and ultimately deadly—chain of events. This void not only affected Pat, but also affected me, my family, and everyone around us. Imagine, reader, your essential being permanently trapped in the state of other, your DNA like a Moëbius strip with no beginning or end. Where do you belong? Perhaps you are neither black nor white. Perhaps you are neither visibly handicapped nor physically or mentally whole. Perhaps you love the same gender, or both genders. In this limbo, you learn only that you are a misfit, an other without community, and thus not always recognized as human.

Such artificial divisions, which are based on fear of the other, are both dehumanizing and deadly. This is true whether the issue is as enduring as racism, sexism, or homophobia, or a more temporally-influenced idea such as whose art to value (formalist or free verse, classical or jazz). Whichever side of the river you stand on, you can't learn to swim without jumping in. The river is only an obstacle until we cross it. The same is true of Frost's net.

The art of poetry is how humans speak truth to one another. It is also a form of play. Poetry in all its forms is there for the playing. Perhaps on some days, playing tennis in regulation whites on a grass court, aiming the ball just inside the line, a Bach partita tinkling in the clubhouse, is the best idea. On other days, there's nothing more fun than a nice, sweaty, loud, squeaky, skidding, ponging game of racquetball, complete with whacked-out horn improvisations on the boombox. Either way, when poetry calls, I'm hopping the good fence and bringing my racket.

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DEDICATION

To Frances Steward McManus Walker (1917-2002),

my grandma,
stronger and braver than she ever knew,

and to Shahid Ali, Tom Bell, Bill Corrington, Dan Doherty,
Ken Gilliam, John Holliman and Stephanie Martin,

absent friends who believed in me.

CLEFT

ARTICULATION

Mystery worries those who know it all
(or think they do, or fear that they do not),
deaf to the notion of the Muse's call.
Not everything can be explained or wrought
by reason's cold instrument, used to prismaticize
a rainbow's hue into atomic weight,
dismiss blue water as reflected skies,
or, from a rock-bound bone, articulate
a sparrow's skeleton. To raise a bird
that lives and sings, that flexes every joint,
its wheeling, dipping art made manifest,
is an act of faith. I work between each word's
unquantifiable junction of the made
and the unmakeable, weaving my poem-nest.

I.

HUNTED HEART

Here is the hunted heart from which we bleed
our passions, cut lengthwise for your best view:
its foursquare chambers, open; its veins feed
spent breath to be recycled back from blue
to red, sure proof of life that filters in
and rides the pressure wave of every pulse
to body's farthest regions—oxygen,
its cargo. Watch, now. See the heart convulse
as Cupid's arrow spears the fleshy grain
beneath the pericardium: to drive
the barb straight through would bring less pain
than to rip it out. Hearts can survive
the sudden spears of cherubs, but beware
lacerated arteries post-affair.

CLIMBING

You won't climb granite with me, mind divorced
from mine, not comprehending why I scrape
soft flesh on stone, where gravity tips force
on razored ledges. This cliff's rockface shape
I take as mine. Surgically, I select
the wires and chocks to custom-fit each crack,
tug tight until they catch. Such slim protec-
tion, clipped to faith, is safest when it's slack.
My weight on vinestem legs turns arabesque
above your head. The vision frays your nerves.
My boots bite death-slip's lip. The ground's grotesque.
I fall-catch-swing, a living plumb-bob's curves.
You'd never take this risk, afraid to die.
We have our different viewpoints, you and I.

WHAT I WANTED TO TELL YOU

I pray you not, you lonely heart, to seek
the perfect mate, as she does not exist.
You don't believe me? Ask your therapist:
your fear of miscalculation's not unique.
You cannot plan your future, every week,
by poring over the personals' twisted truth,
nor that of horoscopes. Why waste waning youth,
seeking guarantees against some freak
cobbled together from your deepest fears?
If tolerance begins at home, try, please,
to give me the greatest benefit of your doubt
(as well as faith). Humans can't do without
each other's company over fleeting years.
Today is just one day that we can seize.

LOCK-OUT

I'm drop-forged hard against your memory, when
you drive past me on Oak Street, someone else
up front with you. My iron composure melts,
a key bent crosswise in a lock. I've been
too busy getting back to where I'd left
your life since you'd unlocked my love last year
to think of you. You picked the lock. You're here,
bashing down my barrier. Thief, bereft
of human sympathy! Get out of this place
where you are not invited! I tried to block
the door to talk with you, not to keep you locked
inside like some prisoner of love. The only trace
you left was two thin scratches on my wrist.
Key words, *I love you*, distort beneath your twist.

THROW ME SOMETHING

When Mardi Gras arrives with its excess,
I miss you for a moment—how your hand
caught mine (last year) and, as we ran, *largesse*
of beads and cups rained down around the band—

but that was then. Today, in costume and tights,
I bike past gathering marchers and gay boys
who dodder drunkenly in Fat Tuesday's light.
I join the crowd and lose myself in noise,

feel like an island at sea amid my friends.
Sipping champagne, I gaze from the balcony
above the maskers and wonder, as it ends,
why any woman would throw herself at me.

It's over. I think I'm going home un-kissed
today, until a pretty girl insists

ECHO CALLS NARCISSUS

What are two souls as we supposed to do?
I call to you, yet speak in solitude;
you fall for your own shallow image, too
uncompassed to sustain true latitude.

Lost in pools of your own reflected eyes,
you're foundering. I cry to you, *hold on*—
but my words roar back, like flotsam on the rise
of a tide that drags you down until you're gone.

Two sadder souls were never given form,
nor sight nor voice. Condemned, each walks alone,
while seeking unto death the other's half.
What bonfire-tender guides us through this storm?
What siren stirs my spirit back to bone?
The gods lounge on Olympus, and they laugh.

COURTING THE LION

Kiss my lips, dear. Say goodbye to me.
You've seen me at my worst: my desperate, vain
attempts to understand you, to heal your pain.
Your snarling heart's a martyr's mystery.
I tried to pluck the thorn that's festering in
your claw-crowned paw. You raked my gentle hand;
your bloodsport fangs bit deep at some command
from childhood: *Love's a fight you have to win.*
I did not build the cage you cannot leave.
You trust no one, curled in your thorny doubt.
You've acclimated to your barred-in view,
unable to know friend from foe. I grieve:
I wish to God that I could let you out.

CONCEIT #1: VALENTINE

After Kate Light's "Saf-T-Man"

I never said you were my *entire* heart,
although I gave you use of one big chunk.
Now, indulge the poet in me as I depart
from romantic ideals of self-sacrificial bunk,
and compare you to Valentines: honeyed words, inside
a private envelope that cuts the tongue
if licked too carelessly; sweet hearts, inscribed
with hackneyed phrases (OH YOU KID); *The Young*
and The Restless or *telenovelas* broadcast out
for any channel-changer, indiscreet.
What chintzy promises you made. I pout;
I wish you'd call, yet pray that we don't meet.
Valentines embellish names with Xs and Os,
but what those marks mean, no one really knows.

PETAL IN MY POCKET

Sun and fog collide
blinding what I see
behind my eyelids beautifully
whenever we make love:

sun shines silver-smooth
on flat Lake Pontchartrain
below the bridge and swaying train
that take me far from you;

fog slips velvet-soft
(my hand in pocket knows)
as this petal from the rose
you left on the step for me.

MELISMA

Abjuring your muse,
you cross the world's longest bridge:
your tears fill the lake.

This cold night may seem
one unending syllable's
echoless chasm,

but I hear your notes
stretching the umbrella of
ribs beneath your skin

as your diaphragm
pushes music into flight,
into night, Songbird.

KISSING IN THE CARWASH

My fingertips code
our secret touch
into the buttons.

Our window rides up, kissing
steam. We roll slowly
together into our miracle,

curtained by the waterfall.
Fingertips find jawlines;
lipwarmth draws us

melting mouth to mouth,
our tongues dissolving.
Rain rattles our tin roof,

liquefied hot wax
discreetly sheets the windows
against the voyeur moon.

Warm wind roars over us
as we pull out, shining, clean,
into the dirty world.

DREAMING OF YOUR HAIR

from my porch I watch
sweet New Orleans thunderstorm's
finest densest rain

mockingbird on the wire
fanning his tail
shimmying his shower

puts me in mind of you
on my porch near the river
I dream of washing your hair

then brushing it and telling you
the Mexican story of the woman
who combed life into rivers

who combed otters and fish
from her river of tresses
her hair the fountainhead

dreaming on my porch
near yours
near the river

I sip tea and remember
flowing your curls
through my fingers

last night driving home
under that flowing glow
you named *a teacup moon*

CLOSED FOR YOUR CONVENIENCE

My lover has no coffee,
so at 5:15 a.m.
in the cold
I go to the grocery.

Burning with sleep,
I park in the fire lane,
get out and stand before
the electric-eye portal.

It becomes clear to me
through its impassivity
that the eye will not open
before 6 a.m.

This also dawns on the bird
beating its blue and red
against the glass door:
closure need not be concrete.

I flutter my hands
down and around
the fright-frayed baby,
guiding it downward.

Freed by such shut doors,
I am finding
the old clear routes
closed for my convenience:

I stop beating my head
against my lover's glass door,
her impassive eye
blind to my dawn.

II.

PELICAN SONNET

Wide wings outspread above the bayou's mouth,
a sky-hung V of brown with kite-webbed feet,
curved grace of neck, slick crest of gold crown, neat
white mask, fish-crooking beak, and flesh-fold pouch:
the Pelican is back! Nearly lost
to DDT when I was still a child,
her eggshells crumbled under her in "wild-
and-scenic" habitats. Years later, grown, I crossed
the continent before I saw my first
wild pelicans, beyond the rocky beach,
formation-flying out of humans' reach,
plotting their courses back to bayous cursed
with petrochemicals. She did not fail:
she's back to bless us with her brown wing's sail.

PATRONS' DINNER BY INVITATION ONLY

In memory of Everette Maddox

We hungry poets at Jesus' feet
make small talk with big-name sorts,
eat free bread, cocktail shrimp, and meat,
sport our scruffy shoes and shorts,

decry *The Marble Faun* aloud,
praise *The Double Dealer* days,
while beaux-arts' patronizing crowd
fumbles cocktails and canapés.

O William Faulkner, where art thou?
Poor broke bastard, whose descent
by bedsheet in your early days
because you could not pay the rent

has been forgotten. Your apartment
has been enshrined. It ought to be
a rent-free starving artists' zone
for folks like Everette Maddox. He

stayed loopy drunk, but outwrote God,
and would, I know, appreciate
the Southern *horsepitality*
and courtyard view, but it's too late

for Everette. How about those guys
still living—Jimmy, Bill, and Stan?
The sleeping's cold out on the street.
Poets find shelter where they can

on friendly floors, deep in a drink,
hustling busfare and cigarettes.
Once in a while, we get free eats
at lit-fests and harbor no regrets

for crashing the cathedral gate.
You think that we deserve it? Yup.
Instead of scrabbling after scraps,
our tribe invites itself to sup.

Next year, we poets will hold a bash
with covered dishes of food-stamp spaghetti,
take up our drums and scary masks
and march in—led by Ferlinghetti!—

to this courtyard under Faulkner's window,
in playful spirit, not malicious,
and repay hospitality
by dancing around the chafing dishes.

HAS-BEENS QUALIFY

Found in the article "In the 16th minute, has-beens qualify for fame," The New York Times, 13 March 2002, B6

Has-beens qualify
 as spectators eating hot dogs,
 not Warholian spectacles. With them,
 it's a cruel joke: despite the different kinds
 of fame, appearances satisfy
 lurid, bloated Vanity. *Is* there life
 for these people, always titillating,
 that carnival sideshow?

What are *you*
 famous for? The nasty undercurrent?
 Their comeuppance—"*let's*
catch them in that pool"? It's a coincidence
 not known to tax the brain:
 fight to preserve her new nose,
 typical of a has-been's nude spread.
 Consequences eventually lead to
 the essence of the media-hungry boxer,
 spotlight on earnest profiles selling hard-
 core video penis shot down over Bosnia,
 a perfectly logical fit: ridiculous, quasi-famous,
 clinging to their last scrap.

POEMS IN AND NEAR THE PRISON MUSEUM

*For Dobie Wayne Gillis, executed at Angola
despite questionable DNA findings*

I.

Huddie Ledbetter 19469, Colored

Nov 21 1931

10 Lashes—Laziness

June 27 1932

15 Lashes—Impudence

Discharged August 1, 1931

II.

*The electric chair was retired and sent
to the Louisiana State Museum
in New Orleans, September 24, 1991.*

It was never placed on display there.

III.

Under the clock, the press pool is drowning
in fried chicken.

IV.

*Prison administration banned the press
from Angola during the 1950s.*

*The people felt it meant
Angola had something to hide.*

V.

News: 15 more days.

Smiling Sister Helen clutches her Bible.

The press corps silently prays
several different ways.

VI.

To cleanse, listen to Leadbelly.
Repeat as necessary.

III.

THAT MAGIC PILL YOU'VE HEARD SO MUCH ABOUT

*Fluoxetine HCl: the active ingredient
in Prozac, a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor
that restores the brain's natural chemical balance*

Gelatin, fluoxetine and salt,
you give me back my ability to cope.
Biology's a fact. It's not my fault.

A diabetic's insulin will halt
disaster, as do you for whom I grope:
gelatin, fluoxetine and salt.

Less psychoactive than a chocolate malt,
you've got a rep as whiny rich kids' dope.
Biology's a fact. It's not your fault.

Though blamed for postal workers' armed assaults,
you saved this poet from the hanging-rope.
Gelatin, fluoxetine and salt,

sometimes I wish we'd bring this to a halt,
but then I watch biology elope
with normalcy—a fact. It's not my fault.

You hold the combination to the vault
that guards my fortune and preserves my hope.
Gelatin, fluoxetine, and salt,
biology's a fact. It's not our fault.

SOUTHERN HERITAGE

Confedrit uncle, sit an' think a spell:
my firebombed church, my *immigrated* school,
the *cullud* boys I've kissed—you think I'm hell-
bound, being a Democrat, pervert, feminist tool
of Satan, black as sin, not pure and white
as angel's wings. Or Klansman's robes. I know
you love me, in your way, but is it right
to hate thy neighbor as thyself? To go,
as Cousin Jeannie'd hoped to, skatin' with
the *Negro* boys and girls, ain't no big thing—
not *mixin' of the races*, Aunt Barb's myth
of miscegenation, still borne with a sting!
You told me of our great-great, Catherine Chew.
She was a Mohawk. I ain't white. Are you?

ADOPTING THE MASTER'S TONGUE

We were playing, unplugged,
when my not-blood brother
jumped the circuit
and called you NIGGER,

the Original Bad Word
Mama had slapped
faster than BASTARD
from my vocabulary.

Hearing that word
still locks a clamp
on my tongue:

its charge,
electrocuting elocution,
shocks me stupid.

My unasked-for bastard brother,
overseer of motherless afternoons,
cackled and danced,
his fish-white face
stitched together like Frankenstein's.

Shocked silent, was I
adopting my master's tongue
as if it were my birthright?

You dropped your gaze
and your guitar,
ending the first lesson:
The world is a ghetto. . .

Latching your case shut,
you left me:
my dumb mouth gaping,
my palsied tongue lying
limp in my mouth.

Now, years later,
in Snug Harbor or at Carnival,
you do not speak:
your nostrils flare.

Do you still smell that word,
burning like a cross
in my locked mouth?

CLEFT

*For Patrick Delgado Kemp, once
Michael Robert Skelton, 1967-1983*

In the end, your nightmare came true:
you never were one of us: we flung you away,
your final sound the *shick* of your ashes
smacking the Atchafalaya. I remember
the gold-plated can, carrying your ashes,
familiar as those that fell from surreptitious joints
you had smoked in the dark yards of privilege.

Your unbuttoned lip malformed the word
bub-oooh, and you touched the button
on my dress, becoming my brother.
Like fruit forgotten, your heart had lay rotting
in the nursery *where*, our friend Delores
said, *they keep the babies that nobody wants*.
Your eyes locked Mama's into weeks of tears
before Daddy relented, signing us all
up for you at the Volunteers of America.

Until the doctors stitched shut
the buttonholes, trimmed and hemmed
your unfinished edges, cleft lip, cleft palate,
you starved for food and love.

Your rites of passage were not mine:

plastic surgery	speech therapy	ear tubes	eye patches
dental school guinea pig	Ritalin	desk-throwing	
third-grade illiterate	special ed	mainstreaming	fire-setting
		Mandeville	

my life on hold in hard-shelled waiting room chairs,
the blood-and-disinfectant smell seeping into my schoolbooks.

You defied rules, laws, gravity: fell
forty feet from the hackberry
onto your freshly-fixed face.
Blood and spit stained the shell road,
your Cub Scout uniform—somehow,
the stitches held. The doctors plated your arms
with plaster, an armor poorly suited
for battling the world, and praised your bravery.

I tried to love you, I tried to hate you,
 but nothing worked. Every dawn
 for years, your bloody scream cracked
 my sleep. You danced like a plucked, raging rooster
 in family photos, spewed curses in church,
 burst into my room while I tried to write.
 (I still jump too easily, tense too often;
 my nerves remain trapped behind enemy lines;
 I have been well-trained in withstanding torture.)
 Your bony fists flailed my face, you chased me
 with the butcher knife after school, laughing,
 you monster, my home-movie horror,
 the Angel of Death until Mama came home.

Ashes to ashes: the spider-shaped scar
 to the right of your spine, from when
 you fell from the kitchen stool
 onto the shattered cookie jar's spike;
 the misshapen lip, revised again
 and again, like family memories;
 the pitiful limp penis you tried to push
 on me in front of your slumber-party friends—
 until I launched your sorry ass
 through the air and against the wall—
 the one time I thought it was fair to fight back,
 you being smallest and youngest.

It took your theft of 64 kegs
 of beer from a school fair
 to get you locked up.

Forget my own life, its pine-wooded weekends
 away from this mess. The rule of law was,
 we would all drive up and spend weekends
 with you. The goal: to show you that,
 unlike other kids locked in the nuthouse,
 you were ours. Once I felt safe,
 I realized I'd never kissed your lips.
 You learned we were your one true family.
 Even so, Mama was worried, you'd wind up
either in prison for murder, or dead.

You learned (too late?) to kiss, to hug,
 but never learned how to control yourself.
 A day from ungrounding, you picked the lock
 on Daddy's shop, revved your forbidden
 dirt bike, the one you'd saved for all year,
 raced into the twilight, *dust to dust,*

and gaffed yourself, cutting your throat
on the tightwire snare between you and home.
You bled to death on the levee's breast.
Your only gifts left in this world were your eyes:
two strangers are looking through them now.

In this swamp, I have no guilt—just relief.
Our shared brother scraped your dusty traces
into an envelope. The contents of
your rage had settled before opening.
You never were one of us. You are
one of us. You're not. Are too.

NEW BREAST

For Dr. Kathryn Walker Kemp

Mama's got a new breast and she cries for the old one that her children never nursed and she cries for the new one that no one ever can and she cries for the scars that crisscross her breast and she cries for the skin of her new skinny belly where my brother and I came from now peering through the hole in her new breast with no nipple and she cries for the spiderwebs of blood threading beneath the skin of her new breast that does not feel anything but very hard

It is so hard she weeps and it is and I kneel at her feet and wrap my arms around her legs and hug them tight because she is afraid for anyone to touch her right side and her tears fall on my head and she says *I love you* and I say I love you too we all do everybody does and I say you're going to be okay and I say you're not going to die and I say Daddy won't stop looking at you

And she says he has been so good he has emptied the drains the rubber tubes that have sprouted like parasitic vines that bloom rubber bulbs that fill with the pink sap of surgical drainage he empties them three times a day each into its own little cup and he holds each cup to the light and he judges where the mark falls and he does not judge and he dumps the serum into the toilet and he washes me like a baby he washes me so tenderly he is so good

And I tell her she can go to Mardi Gras she can go to Bourbon Street she can stand on the balcony where she stood before she first gave birth and when the college boys scream SHOW YOUR TTTS she can and they will all fall down and worship her great knockers and Daddy says he will go out and buy her a pair of tassels and she laughs and I say she probably would hit him with one of them

Black tassels hang from the corners of her degrees everything she gave her right tit for: the trophies of the triumph of her mind over Lamarque's miles of longhorn pastures and petrochemical plants, passports through marriage and motherhood and tears breaking her crisscrossed reflection peering back from the flooded dishwasher, through *get out of my study, I don't care if the house is on fire*, through battle-scarred bachelor master Ph.D. and the fear she's too late to get tenure, through her pointed letters politely demanding amnesty from dictators, never too late for true words, my Mama, the Amazon archer who lives forever

REPLY TO MY NIECE AFTER 9/11

*The B'ab: a prophet of the Baha'i Faith, descended
from Islam. Baha'is value all major religious prophets.*

Jaybird, I do not know why humans kill,
unless it is because they live in fear
of losing little, dying soon; prize skill
in sneak attacks: or hold false prophets dear.
So often, evil in the name of God
is done, and done again, to "infidels"
by "true believers." But what man wields the rod
of God's retribution? Who sends sin to Hell—
Muslim, Jew, or Trinitarian?
My blue-eyed blonde believer in the B'ab,
your olive dark-eyed Unitarian
Auntie Robin loves you. It's our job
to keep faith when the signs all point to doubt;
it will take more faiths than ours to sort it out.

RED MOON

The ground feels icy through my sweatshirt, but
a festival surrounds us where we lie:
tonight's a full eclipse! Telescopes jut
behind the Science Building, where I may
catch cold or frostbite, lounging on the ground
and staring at the stars.

The campus cops
have turned off lights for us.

We mill around
to stare through each mechanical Cyclops
at piercing beams of light from years ago.
The waxing moon melts slowly. At its peak,
spontaneously, we all howl: we know
that blood-red rock reverberates. We seek
a sign of immortality, a shield,
some hint of God beyond our own dark field.

VITA

Robin Kemp is a native New Orleanian, born on Mardi Gras Day. She is a graduate of Benjamin Franklin Senior High School and the Georgia State University Creative Writing program. In 1996, she left her position as a newswriter for Cable News Network's Atlanta headquarters to devote her energies entirely to poetry.

While at UNO, Robin passed her comprehensive exams with distinction and earned the UNO Vassar Miller Poetry Prize, an Academy of American Poets/Andrea S. Gereighty honorable mention, three scholarships from the West Chester Form and Narrative Poetry Conference, and a P-FLAG/Christopher J. Karnes Memorial Scholarship. In 2000, she was voted "Best Poet in New Orleans" by *Gambit Weekly*. She is a co-founder of the Women's Poetry Conspiracy reading series in New Orleans, and ran the UNO Visiting Poets Series from 1999 through 2001. She makes her home in metro Atlanta, where she is a freelance writer, workshop coordinator, and teacher.

Earlier versions of some poems in this manuscript have appeared or are forthcoming in *Texas Review*, *Mesechabe*, *Chili Verde Review*, and *Ellipsis*. Other poems have been published in the *GSU Review*, *Amethyst*, *Common Lives Lesbian Lives* and the chapbook *Brave Walking*; on the Matthew Shepard Memorial Website; and in the anthology *Rites of Spring: A Miscellany of Verse* (Pecan Grove Press).

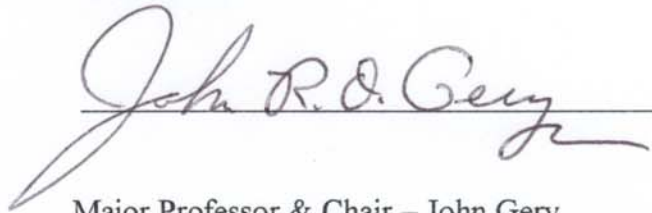
THESIS EXAMINATION REPORT

CANDIDATE: Robin Kemp

MAJOR FIELD: Drama and Communications

TITLE OF THESIS: Cleft: Poems

APPROVED:

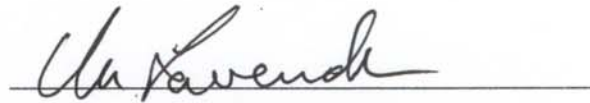
A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "John R. D. Gery", written over a horizontal line.

Major Professor & Chair – John Gery

A handwritten signature in red ink, reading "Robert C. Casler", written over a horizontal line.

Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "William Lavender", written over a horizontal line.

William Lavender

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Randolph Bates", written over a horizontal line.

Randolph Bates

DATE OF EXAMINATION: November 22, 2002