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## House of the soul

Victoria J. Raschke

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Victoria J. Raschke entitled "House of the soul." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Arthur Smith, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Marilyn Kallet, Charles Maland

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

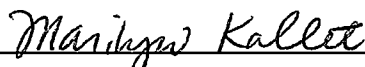
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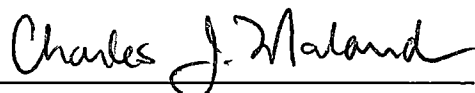


Dr. Arthur Smith, Major Professor

We have read this thesis  
and recommend its acceptance:



Dr. Marilyn Kallet



Dr. Charles Maland

Accepted for the Council:



Associate Vice Chancellor and  
Dean of The Graduate School

# House of the Soul

A Thesis  
Presented for the  
Master of Arts  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Victoria J. Raschke  
May 1999

*for Julian and Kelly*

## Acknowledgements

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I probably never would have come to UT for graduate school if it hadn't been for the birth of my son, Julian. He has been a wonder in my life. Without the help of my parents, financially, emotionally, and physically --as care givers for Julian, I would not have been able to manage being a full-time student and mom. The support of all my extended family and friends has also been crucial. I would especially like to thank my sister Lynne and my soul sisters, Tara, Andrea, and Deb and fellow student/writer/single mom Lisa who has also been a source of sanity and well-placed margaritas.

Finally, in the midst of all this, I managed to meet my soul mate, Kelly Gray. His support of my education and writing has been more valuable to me than I can express. I also have him to thank for honest critique of my work and as inspiration to write more.

"The Seventh Day" has previously appeared in the August 1998 edition of *Pudding Magazine: the International Journal of Applied Poetry*.

## Abstract

These poems, as the title suggests, are explorations of being both a physical being and a spiritual being. They are all equally autobiographical and fictitious in an attempt to search for the universal in the individual experience.

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My mother's attic has a corner filled with dusty three-ring binders full of hideously bad, teenage-angst poems that attest to my determination, or at least to my pathos. Despite this early prolific period, it was my first writing workshop in college that irrevocably lead me down the path of broken pencils and blank pages. The first night of the workshop, an older student who was assisting the class read Robert Hass's "Privilege of Being". He had a remarkably resonant voice, which admittedly heightened the experience, but it was the poem that wooed me. I had never really read anything other than high school classics, John Donne being the most exciting for me. The dichotomy between the spiritual and physical in his poems amazed me, though I doubt *dichotomy* was in my vocabulary at the time. I had been so shocked that the same poet who wrote "The Flea" could write "Batter My Heart." And there was Hass, capturing both the spiritual and physical in one poem,

and one day, running at sunset, the woman says to the man,  
*I woke up feeling so sad this morning because I realized  
that you could not, as much as I love you,  
dear heart, cure my loneliness,*  
wherewith she touched him on the cheek to reassure him  
that she did not mean to hurt him with this truth.  
And the man is not hurt exactly,  
he understands that life has limits, that people  
die young, fail at love,  
fail of their ambitions. He runs beside her, he thinks  
of the sadness they have gasped and crooned their way out of  
coming, clutching each other with old, invented  
forms of grace and clumsy gratitude, ready  
to be alone again, or dissatisfied, or merely  
companionable like the couples on the summer beach  
reading magazine articles about intimacy between the sexes  
to themselves, and to each other,

and to the immense, illiterate, consoling angels. (27-44)

These two elements of being human, the physical body and the spiritual soul, are the very basis of poetry for me. I was hooked.

Throughout college, by happy accident and the careful design of knowledgeable professors, I found more authors who captured these two elements in their work. In fiction, I was most inspired by the novels of Milan Kundera. So many of the men and women who people his stories are seeking some sort of spiritual connection through the clumsy and laughable pursuits of more carnal connections. Even in his inept characters, there is a glimpse of a more noble desire.

Though sometimes feeling as though I was being force fed, so much of what I was reading intrigued me. I was lucky to have access to reams of poetry and fiction produced by various nationalities of Eastern and Central European writers. It was often difficult to relate to the political aspects of the work, the human vulnerability and longing are universal. It seemed only natural to me that in a world that had been systematically purged of the societal opiates of religion, men and women would strive to find meaning in each other. My own culture seemed almost as devoid of meaning bound by consumerism and spiritually hamstrung by its cousin televangelism.

In "To Robinson Jeffers" Czeslaw Milosz writes,

If you have not read the Slavic poets  
so much the better. There's nothing there  
for a Scotch-Irish wanderer to seek. (1-3)

I always wanted to believe that it was a tongue-in-cheek admonition. I

wanted to understand. In my quest to do so, I spent 14 months living and traveling in Central and Eastern Europe. I met many of the men and women I had been reading.

In Hungary, I had goulash in the small, book-lined apartment of Eva Toth. Reconciling the powerful poems I had read with her almost grandmotherly personality was difficult at first, but ultimately it made its own kind of sense. How many of us could sustain the emotion of a poem in our daily lives? It seemed to me that those who had tried usually did not live to see their 35th birthdays. From Eva Toth's example, along with other things, it became more and more obvious to me that to be a writer, I needed two things: a fire and determination to experience the full range of human emotions and the events that precipitate them, and a quiet reflective solitude to examine them in.

I rushed headlong into Phase One; at 19 that was the easy part. I rented an apartment in the capital of Slovenia with another American woman, also a poet. In between my search for the "writer's life" in the bars and clubs of Ljubljana, Lori, my new roommate, taught me about poetry. She introduced me to more of the poetry of my own language through Gerald Stern and Linda Gregg. Gregg's poems were exquisite, luminous pearls to me. In "Glistening", the poem that I remember most from that time, having read it over and over, she transforms the simple act of a woman washing her body into a sacred libation,

As I pull the bucket from the crude well,  
the water changes from dark to light

more silver than the sun. When I pour it  
over my body that is standing in the dust  
by the oleander bush, it sparkles easily  
in the sunlight with an earnestness like  
the spirit close up. The water magnifies  
the sun all along the length of it.  
Love is not less because of the spirit.  
Delight does not make the heart childish.  
We thought the blood thinned, our weight  
lessened, that our substance was reduced  
by simple happiness. (1-12)

I read that poem many times, still it has taken me most of the six years since I first read it to come to my own understanding of it. The time spent there was necessary. It was often beautiful and perfect, riding my bike out of town toward the distant Julian Alps or tracing the path around an icily pristine mountain lake. The experience in Slovenia was also painful-- events at home out of my control and coming to terms with some hard facts about life and myself.

Since then I have been searching for a place of solitude, a moment when I can realize as Gregg suggests that we don't have to suffer constantly to be worthy or important. It hasn't been easy. I had a child by myself. Though it has had its difficult moments, I have learned more from the experience and from my son than I could have ever imagined. I have worked some thankless jobs-- dishwasher, postal worker, coffee shop waitress. They did serve to help me decide to go back to school to get a graduate degree.

Studying poetry more closely in graduate school gave me names for what had amazed me in Donne and Hass and Gregg and the nearly endless list of Slovenian, Hungarian, Polish, Bosnian and Czech writers in which I

had immersed myself. The lyric. The sonnet. The ode. They all hearkened back to the dithyramb, a moment of ecstasy, of disengaging from the mundane. That is exactly what all these poets had been doing.

I read Sappho, understanding the thread that continued on from her for the first time. In James Wright I saw the synthesis of the physical and spiritual other, writing about what you know to chink away at what you cannot. He does this in many, if not all of his poems, but the one that is clearest to me is "Names Scarred at the Entrance to Chartres,"

The cracked song  
Of my own body limps into the body  
Of this living place. I have nobody  
To go in with  
But my love who is a woman,  
And my crude dead, my sea,  
My sea, my sepulcher, the crude  
Rhythm of my time. (9-16)

and,

I have no way to go in  
Except only  
In the company of two vulgars,  
Furies too dumb to remember  
Death, our bodies' mother, whose genius it is  
To remember our death on the wet  
Roads of Chartres, America, and to forget  
Our names. The wild strawberry leaf  
Does not need to bother with remembering  
Its own name, and Doyle, Dolan, and me. (26-35)

The speaker is entering this sacred holy place and the entrance has been marred by two names scrawled on the stone there. By the end of the poem, Wright has equated himself with the two graffiti artists. They are all "drunk on their women," who help them forget their names, who show them that

moment of ecstasy-- the dithyramb. They are all trying to attain some kind of immortality by scrawling their names. The difference here, I think, between the owners of the two names at the entrance and the speaker is the speaker knows he is scrawling out his name, but he does it with reverence. I can only hope to be as reverent.

And I am still writing. My poems have changed over this time, audibly, tonally, even--at the risk of sounding like a New Age harlot-- spiritually. It was in many ways as if I had been given permission to root around in my own experience and perception for the kernel of universality. What I had once thought was too confessional or too "light" to write about suddenly seemed ripe for exploration, expounding. I am sure I haven't reached poetic nirvana; in fact, I am glad that I haven't. I look back on what I have read, the history of what is lyric poetry and realize that it is a process, that it is cumulative. And I have come to think of writing a poem as this: Writing the poem itself is like painting an oil Polaroid. Get it down, now, while it is vivid and wet. But, the *process* of writing is like framing and hanging it on the wall; I have to constantly back away to see if it's straight.

## The Seventh Day

Small. The stars are small,  
cold like tiny mirrors sewn  
into the pleated fabric of a gypsy woman's skirt.  
The two lovers are alone here under them  
his breath warm and moist against the curve of her.  
How difficult is it to conceive below these wide-eyed suns?  
There is something inside her empty with wanting,  
crying out every time she starts to bleed.  
It isn't that he knows this  
or even wants it. It's her.  
This need to create.  
It's that she's only loved near him.  
It's being afraid to die, without  
screaming that creation,  
feeling blood hot on her legs.  
Now with him inside her  
she feels real with the possibility that between  
some spark is forming,  
growing into her mother's laugh,  
her father's dark eyes.

## Missing Me

I lie on my back and stare  
into the spring branches overhead  
twisting and yielding to the clear sky.  
They remind me of dark bodies,  
limbs intertwined in sleep, sex.  
They remind me of your  
arms around my waist, lips  
at the nape of my neck  
as I'm brushing my teeth.

I've missed you these last few days,  
more than usual-- less than  
right after you leave.  
The park today, this bench, the leaves,  
the sun are mine.  
This is how I really love you,  
when I feel closest,  
reaching into you if I need to.  
Here is where I brought you  
every time you left, to say goodbye.

I sent you a postcard once from Chicago.  
Georgia O'Keefe or Klimt, I forget.  
I used what I wrote in that small space  
to flesh out the loneliness.  
I saw it lying on your desk weeks later.  
I remember thinking how quiet it was,  
lying in the park  
when I was the one on the road.



## Fatherhood

At five months I stood  
to my thickening waist in ocean,  
trying to drown the last  
of my feelings for him.

After twelve hours of labor  
my sister sat in quiet amazement  
that I had not once called his name.

Now, when my son laughs,  
it's almost as if he is only me.

## Creative Anachronism

I haven't straightened my room in weeks  
if only for the illusion of more things  
than my own. There are books on the desk  
ones that you always meant to borrow.  
Odd it isn't even you anymore, but the memory  
of another warmth in the room, another scent on the sheets  
I push into the washer with wet baby bibs and sleepers.  
When someone asks what his father does, I say only that you travel.

If I pile the pillows exactly, it's as if I am curled  
against an armless, legless torso.  
And in my effort to act as though this is how it always was  
I've created all the things that never were between us  
and it is easier, quieter without your pretending.

## Single Parenting

I think sometimes it's like  
driving off a bridge,  
the long, slow plummet  
engine first into the river,  
my son in the car seat  
smiling his father's smile  
in the rearview mirror.  
In my water dream,  
the sun hatch is open, of course,  
and I unhook his harness first,  
hold him to me,  
pushing him through the opening  
like a beach ball.  
I swim gracefully through the hole  
cut in the roof of my car  
toward flickering, choppy light.  
When we surface he is  
smiling, bright-eyed  
as if he is just waking  
asking  
*Please, Mommy,  
do it again.*

## Lacking Magic

She lay there the first time,  
his arm crushed beneath her,  
his fingers tapping softly on her spine.  
His body relaxed under her palm, her cheek.  
Breaths evened out to the long, slow rhythm of sleep.  
She had heard the ocean in his chest.

Tonight, she puts her cheek to his sleeping body,  
the slow heaving of his chest.  
She listens, not for breath. Not for  
the whirring and pumping of valves.  
Only heartbeat drums against solar plexus.  
Air moves in and out of the bronchi.  
His arms are crossed  
beneath the weight of his own head.  
She pushes herself from the damp sheets,  
dresses to go.  
He murmurs, turns away.  
She looks at the angles of his back before she pulls the door to.  
Muscle stretched across bone.

## Hunger

Water hot in the kettle, whistling.  
Toast crisped on the edge,  
burning fingertips from appliance to plate.  
Raspberry leaf tea pinking  
against the ceramic in her hands,  
reminds her of his fingers  
pushing the furry feel of berries to her tongue,  
both of them laughing.  
It's the taste she wants to remember  
not the smell or texture,  
but the sweet, tart tang just across the tip.

## House of the Soul

She stands looking in the cracked mirror  
of a restaurant bathroom, the din of voices outside.  
She thinks how awful the lucidity is,  
of knowing one's past, of knowing  
the pattern from here.

On the street she passes two young men.  
They whistle and elbow each other laughing.  
She kicks up her stride, angry.  
Not at the men, but at her own needy flesh  
that reaches out, even to insult.

Her living room is dark.  
Her nakedness fills the room as she slides  
from suit and shoes, hose and bra.  
She turns on the light,  
sees her reflection in the sliding glass door.  
Behind it, across the patio  
her neighbor stands, holding the newspaper  
looking through his own reflection at her.

## Borrowing Trouble

A friend believes  
to compartmentalize emotion  
is a sign of impending insanity.  
I feel like Oscar in that film  
sorting his dead mother's buttons  
by color and size.

Her father died in the spring  
and she is paralyzed with grief.  
Her kitchen is bare.  
I wonder what she feeds her family  
and she is so thin,  
I wonder if it is her own flesh.

And my system is to pretend  
I don't smoke because  
I never buy them and  
to pretend I never wonder  
where my son's father is now.

## Crush

We stand across from each other,  
he and I.  
And me, I will myself  
not to lean in,  
hide the blush across my chest.  
I will myself  
not to touch my naked fingertips  
to his mouth, willing  
the buds of my tongue crushed  
under the smooth enamel ridge  
of my teeth  
not to say  
I am imagining that mouth,  
almost cherubic lips,  
of carefully aligned teeth  
holding my lip between them  
and a tongue flicking  
across the tautness there  
with the lithe swiftness  
of a blue racer across my front steps.



## Stretch Marks

Kneeling between my knees he lays  
his hands on my belly, aligning fingers  
with each smooth scar,  
each imperfection on the skin.  
They look as if I had been raked by tiger claws,  
but they are the marks of ripeness,  
lines pulled open by growth, like plums  
at their early autumn peak bursting with sugar.  
When I run soaped hands over the traces,  
I think of my own fecund powers, of listening  
to my son's light breath in the dark.

It's Your Grief that I Envy

It isn't her form that maddens me  
or raises my bile.  
It isn't the image of the two of you together  
that makes me quake with jealousy.

My color drains and my soul  
grows leaden, I rant and rave,  
cry and throw the dishes into the sink,  
wish for some relief from

you walking in a haze  
your face pale, wan with hunger,  
starving yourself for a love  
she won't give you.

And I think how happy they must be,  
those who can forget,  
happier still,  
those who can walk away.

## Self-Absorption Is a Terrible Thing to Own

You said that she was unique  
because she listened intently,  
reminded you later of something  
you forgot you mentioned.  
And me, I have become  
a chatty Miss Bates in my solitude--  
gossiping and rambling  
about what I ate for breakfast.  
How could you know  
that I am jealous? --first  
I thought of you, for talking to her,  
with her, but finally it is of her--  
jealous of her listening.

## In a Self-Help Bookstore Cafe

In an alternate universe  
I am a mother of three  
staying home and writing  
sadder little poems about laundry  
and a different kind of isolation.  
I am not this woman  
who has had two babies carved  
from her body, who has balked  
at every offer of love.  
I am not sitting asking myself  
"Do I like to be alone?"

Outside, young women pass on the street  
in the guises of more perfect bodies.  
They walk with purpose or  
laugh among themselves,  
pointing behind their slim hands  
to a man in jeans squatting  
to pick up the car keys  
he dropped near them.

I am observing  
rather than walking toward  
anywhere else, pretending or  
perhaps believing that it matters  
where or how I sit or stand.  
Won't I always be observing  
myself, constructing an other me  
who is better, purer,  
having always made the right decision?

## It Is the Absence of Beauty that Makes Us Weep and Long

From this window  
I can watch a city breathe  
the moist, hot air of subterranean boilers.  
Rain continues to fall.  
The sky undulates with gray.  
I wait inside. Not for spring or money or  
whispered hope of the prodigal lover's return.  
But to forgive myself,  
my own foolish belief in the power  
of a brilliant sunset and  
the slow rise of the moon over my backyard lake.  
I sit in wonder  
staring into the darkening evening,  
concrete and sky meshing in uniform blue-black  
punctuated by halos of fluorescent lights in the fog.

## The Pilgrim

### I. ocean

Somewhere near Point Arena,  
it has rained for days.  
The path to the service road is broken  
with small sprouting plants,  
sea grasses and succulents purpled on the edge,  
like ripening flowers.  
The rocks are worn here, small depressions  
make the surface look cooked,  
like a bisque bubbled for hours.  
Larger hollows are tide pools  
holding tentative creatures,  
spiny crabs and starfish clinging to the rocks.  
We climb down the cliff,  
out of the wind, to watch the waves.  
The tide is glacial green,  
milky and pale like rivers in the Alps.  
We watch the seals and the otters  
play in the churning water  
against the jagged edge of land.  
A huge wave crashes close to our perch.  
I can feel its percussion.  
He says, "Rogue wave,"  
as if he expected it, tells me  
the science of cycles and tides,  
how the waves form far away,  
move through each other, combine.  
He smiles, climbing the rocks, spiderlike,  
"Never turn your back on the sea."  
I am nervous now and climb higher,  
further from the surf,  
sit quietly, chastised.  
I know I am the errant daughter,  
that she is trying to reclaim me.  
We start for the car.  
I keep looking back at the storm-darkened water.  
It starts to rain again,  
searing cold through our thin coats.  
We can't even run,

the ground is so uneven.

## II. desert

My sister Lynne and I sit in the back of the van  
in lawn chairs bolted to the floor,  
our sandaled feet propped  
on the cooler between the front seats.  
Beer in hand, I'm probably breaking three state laws.  
My aunt navigates as my uncle drives  
across the mountain and into the valley,  
the air changing by degrees.  
Drier and hotter.  
The sand I expected is covered with the spikes  
and spines of desert greenery.  
The rains have made everything bloom.  
I didn't expect the brilliance of the barrel cactus  
or the ocotillos' red feathered tips.  
We go off road just outside Ocotillo Wells,  
past the hot box trailers with their machined yard art,  
and into a wash posted for flash flooding.  
The sky is china blue against the rusty orange  
and sandy surfaces of the rocks.  
We stop and unpack the cooler for lunch.  
The bread dries out in my hand  
while I inspect the curves of the cliff faces,  
study the flaked surface of the floor  
where the rains have recently been and  
the blooms clinging to the crevices in the canyon walls.  
I move to pull my hair away from my face  
and it crackles, already dried.  
My skin is papery under my tank top.  
We drive back out to the Anza-Borrego ranger station.  
Touristy women in wide straw hats  
congregate near the bathrooms in the shade.  
I know I will burn, but I can't stay out of the sun.

Lynne and I smoke a cigarette  
sitting on a low stone wall,  
baked crumbling by the heat.  
I stare off above the straw hats  
to strange desert trees.

There are shocks of orange in their branches  
hanging like Carolina spanish moss or gaudy paper garlands.  
My aunt follows my gaze.  
"Love grass," she says,  
"People call it devil grass, too."  
We buy postcards and  
there are none of the strange orange parasite.  
As we leave to drive back over the mountains to Escondido,  
I stare out the window,  
my beer growing warm between my knees.  
*I am lying on the desert floor with the scorpions,  
absorbed by the desiccant sand.  
The devil grass invades my hair  
and only my mouth is left,  
the obscene, fuchsia bloom of a barrel cactus.*

### III. city

I can see the city through the spun wires of the bridge.  
It is 4:00 and the pastel row houses  
look like honeybutter spread over the hills.  
It isn't like a city I have seen.  
Maybe the air is quieter here or the quakes  
have knocked its soul loose.  
Later I stand on the sea wall  
looking out onto the water,  
black as the sky but glinting  
with the lights of skyscrapers and boats.

In Chinatown we buy solar-powered cricket boxes.  
Inside the cheap plastic, foil crickets bounce on springs.  
It sounds like a summer night in Tennessee.  
I am delighted by the chirping, and  
by the mysterious mooncake with the hard-cooked yolk inside.  
We eat it in North Beach at a coffee house  
where we buy cappuccino  
and sit at the same table with a Javanese man.  
He tells us how to cut the mooncake  
so every piece has yolk,  
salt to cut the sweet of the bean paste.

I buy a postcard in the Haight. A picture



of the Haight-Ashbury sign in the Sixties,  
where the Gap and Ben & Jerry's are now.  
When I go to the counter to pay  
it is filled with silver necklaces. I ask to see one  
and I buy it just from its feel against my throat.  
A tight circle of rainbow moonstones.  
I give quarters to the people on the street,  
to the woman who "will work for pot."  
We walk to his apartment,  
I am quiet, high with the air  
and the cool stones at my clavicle.  
He leans in to kiss me, and I give.  
There is nothing to hold it back, but  
there is no love in the gesture--  
it is the body  
and the soul disturbed from sleep  
that clings and cries out.  
I see a woman across the street  
watching us through the blinds.  
She sees me looking at her and turns away.  
I close my eyes again,  
feel my breath, his skin.  
There is a love in it,  
but nothing I can name.

#### IV. mountain

We are standing on the steps of the Palomar observatory  
looking at San Jacinto in the distance.  
It is still white with snow in March.  
It is cold here, too.  
My bare legs are pink with it.  
The telescope was built in the 40s  
and seems ancient and lumbering in its dome.  
The drawings and photographs in the viewing gallery  
remind me of elementary school films  
on radioactivity, combustion engines.  
The sign says to stay on the path  
because of the rattlesnakes, but  
I want to run my hands over  
the smooth skin of the manzanita.  
I stray off the trail just enough to reach

the polished mahogany-color of the twisted trees.  
With my hand on cool bark covering pith  
and the threat of a rattle at my feet,  
I know there is no mechanical way to get closer to god.

## The Geometry of Love: a proof

In the morning my son  
lays his head on my belly,  
perpendicular to me  
his small feet jutting out  
across the bed,  
and nuzzles my arm  
like a kitten pushing  
against its mother for milk.  
I remember how his father  
and I lay the night  
he was conceived,  
forming tangents with our bodies,  
touching always.  
And now his father and I  
are parallel lines,  
each running our own course,  
never touching,  
our lives bisected  
only by this small boy.

## Breaking Bread

I shred the dark leaves of spinach  
with the steeled edge of my favorite knife,  
rocking it on the cutting board  
in smooth, pulling strokes,  
then slide the thin ribbons off the wood  
into the soup faintly glowing with saffron.

It is quiet in the kitchen, the house.  
Outside the leaves churn ahead of the wind  
in quick eddies on the lawn.  
It is the yearly ritual,  
finding the perfect sweet potatoes  
and acorn squash in the market,  
soaking the dry chick peas the day before,  
washing and washing and washing  
the sand from the greens,  
chopping the last of summer's tomatoes,  
enjoying the liminal time between seasons  
when the perishable summer fruits  
and the autumn yield for keeping overlap.

Mary Francis

Sitting alone,  
eating a bagel on the steps  
outside my office,  
I thought of M. F. K. Fisher  
living in Last House,  
the cottage her friend built for her,  
and eating breakfast alone  
after a life of fine food and conversation.  
She might fry an egg in a little sweet butter  
to eat with a piece of toasted peasant bread  
from the market up the road and  
maybe a spoonful of blackberry jam from summer.  
Her own ritual uninterrupted by chatter  
or a finicky child's request for something different.

Despite my love of ripe mangoes  
sectioned in the skin, messily eaten,  
and a cup of coffee with milk  
warming my hand while I read the paper,  
for my last meal,  
I would request  
company.

## After Being Alone

It is funny this  
feeling myself open  
like a night-blooming flower  
at the thought of you.  
I am fascinated by the quirk  
and texture of you,  
want to run my hands  
over the smooth skin of your scars  
feel the soft flesh,  
secret behind your knee.  
I want to push myself into your brain,  
sit with the gears  
and the machinery of your mind.  
Is it safe?  
How do you feel about  
owning guns, or god,  
or looking into my son's eyes  
and making him believe  
that he is enough yours?  
And if,  
I were to say to you,  
now,  
now it is safe,  
what then?

## Suspension of Disbelief

How can I admit I am not good at love  
when it is placed before me  
like a basket filled with August peaches  
of which I am told I may eat what I will?  
How can I admit fear?  
What if our eyes meet making love and I,  
still afraid, still broken in my sex,  
could not look away? What if  
your teeth are grazing the soft-purpled areola  
and I murmur that I am an impostor, a silkie  
having strayed too far from the rocks of the beach?  
What if I had married my son's father? or he  
had meant the things he said that night  
on the mountain when I had just started  
to believe he loved me because  
I had busted my lip against his chin  
and he had kissed it swelling and bloody?

## On Finally Touching Your Skin

The hairs on your arm are fine  
as thin wires the phone company dreams of.  
Short messages blow across them.



## After Spending the Night

You make tea in the morning,  
milk billowing to a creamy tan.  
The first sun slides through the window panes.  
The neighbor's dog barks at nothing,  
at the light across last night's rain.  
I marvel at how this came to be, how  
sentimental I've become.

## Research Is What I Do When I Don't Know What I'm Doing

A desk littered with guidebooks and computer printout,  
this is how I cope.

Vancouver, Victoria, the Island,  
even Seattle. You are so far from here,  
3000 miles plus

the way the lines on the map lay.

It seems as if it is farther--

a visa, a long drive across the flat treeless plains  
and over the roof of the continent  
in a rattling, rented moving van.

I have been in just this place before.

Here, just past the *I love you*, past  
the *this is what I want, I am so sure*.

There is the panicked flutter,  
the cell memory of disappointment settling  
into the wiring of my brain.

And I am trying

to make it different now,

clinging to whatever won't run through my fingers.

## VITA

Victoria Raschke was born in Detroit, Michigan, where she lived until she was three. Her family then moved to eastern Tennessee, where she grew up on the banks of the Tennessee River. She received her B.A. in Humanities with a concentration in creative writing and a minor in women's studies from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga in 1994. She had her son Julian in the fall of 1995. After receiving her M. A. in English from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, she and her son are moving to Vancouver, British Columbia, where she will explore writing as an expatriate Southerner. She is engaged to be married in December of 1999, which is another good reason to move to Canada.