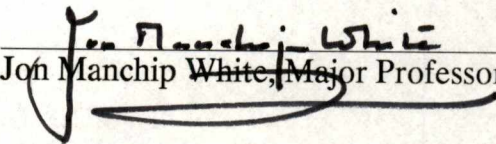
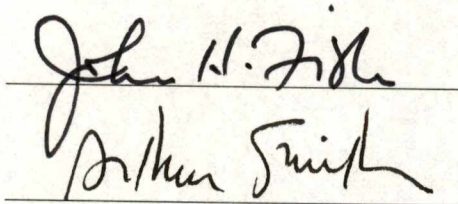


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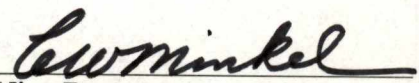
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Jon Manchip White, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:



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WHOSE DARK EYES WANDERED?: A CREATIVE WRITING
PROJECT IN POETRY

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

Candance W. Wages

June 1988



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Two other important persons need to be recognized for their invaluable assistance. Dinah Brock managed to keep up with me and my eccentricities. For that I am eternally grateful. And, most important, I recognize and cherish the love and support of my husband, Bill.

ABSTRACT

Poetry has changed a great deal since William Wordsworth's revolutionary declaration in 1800 that poetry is "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." Other poets since have experimented with form, diction, rythm, etc. One wonders what Wordsworth would think of modern poetry today in all of its diverse manifestations. And yet, it really hasn't diverged from the basic spirit of his words. It is still the voice of the common people in common language, inspiring a sense of wonder, all with the very powerful voice of emotion within the poet.

These poems, too, speak in the spirit of the romantic manifesto and are akin to the theme of the exile in search of a place of peace and acceptance. In this case it is a journey through the exile of pain to see if there is peace from the nightmare on the other side.

The poems are divided into four sections which are: Father, Mother, Lover, and Voices. These divisions represent the search for the individual voice of the poet. This can be achieved only after the poet has explored the well worn path to the past and reached a catharsis of pain and experience. The new voice, then, is spoken in the last poem of the work when the poet has found the means to pass over into the present.

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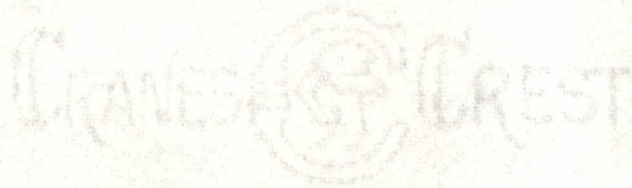
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INTRODUCTION

Once, when I was a child, my grandmother helped me write a poem about a fish. I provided the words, and she provided the rythm. The poem won a prize, but it would be many years later before I would write other poems. My grandmother, in a way, provided the rythm for those as well.

Our families--father, mother and those who come before and after them provide the rythm for our lives. We endow them with great power, and they rule sometimes like orchestral maestros over their small charges. There are ways to escape, of course. Some rebel with noisy cacophony, some merely walk away. I chose, instead, to change the rythm and the words, thereby rewriting the music to which I dance.

So, again I turned to poetry, and it became for me the way to escape the inevitable pain associated with the search for approval and love from those who direct us from our infancy. The work begins with a poem about the very real search for the man who, faceless and nameless, was my real father. Who was he? Where is he now? Why did he abandon my natural mother? The poems then move to the second father and mother, the adoptive ones, and deal with the issues surrounding their unhappy lives and the search for their approval. Lovers follow, and with the last poem, a kind of catharsis releases the poet to move on to other voices and, finally, to sing and to dance to her own song!



I. FATHER

WHOSE DARK EYES WANDERED?

Whose dark eyes wandered
over her body
long ago
deep in the night
asking a question
how to get out of it
let her down easily
walk away handily
winning the prize?

Whose dark eyes wandered
over the faces
of men in the streets
asking the question
how to get out of them
the feelings she needed
from all possible fathers
with eyes full of lies?

SEEKING THE DEAD

Scanning obituaries
for a name
that strikes a chord
of recognition,
afraid of finding it
one day.

What then?

To go and search
for dark eyes and red hair.
Too late to ask the question,
"Were you the one who lied
and said you loved her?"

To speak again to mute lips
and cold hands
like the man who called me daughter
when she had to give me up.
To look into the eyes
of the one you chose instead
red-rimmed with sadness
at your loss.

I could counsel her on that one
about loss
and grief
and the pain of never knowing
the man you want the most.

KNIGHT ERRANT

I turn over in my mind
and in my sleep
the image of a fist
floating through the air
and my mother's head
bouncing from the wall
with wild surprise and horror.
You supposed I was napping,
but I saw

reflected
in the cabinet glass
you,
and you saw me
and sauntered forward
not seeking redemption,
but from that day forward
your sin was double
and the penance forever.

The fairy tale should have ended
on the day you struck your lady,
my knight in bloody armor,
throwing his lady to the wall.
But I never stopped waiting
for you to ride again
on white stallions
back into my favor
to beg my forgiveness.

Now I would have audience
with the knight errant
in my empty hall
where illusions hang
in cobweb tatters,
and a shining sword waits
for a hero
not you,
but the one who will slay you.

DIRTY GREEN

Green is your favorite
color. How nice?
To love the color of living
things and leaves.
And down among the leaves
glides a green snake
with green eyes
with dirty flecks
of gold
and brown
and green,
the color of poison
and bile
and some kinds of feces
and stagnant pools
where nothing moves
but green snakes
with green eyes
through the slime.

GHOST FATHER

There wasn't any funeral-
only one small mourner
listening to the silence
that battered at her heart.

He "died" for me when I was six
but how he'd try to mend and fix it up
with little bits
of pocket change.

He moves about the emptiness
with mournful sighs
and I say,
"It's only the ghost."

There is a poem I can't write.
It's found in the dead place,
the space in my heart
reserved for father.

FATHER

Your dark silhouette appears again
in the light of my bedroom window.
My husband who sleeps beside me
becomes my dream life mother
and I beg you not to hurt us,
but you stand silent like the darkness
that slinks away at morning.

I don't know you.

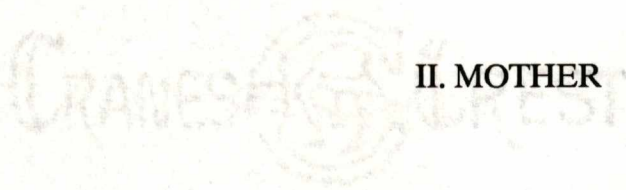
You are the dream that comes again
to do its violence
with a knife that slices downward,
but no blood flows from empty corpses
when you carve the name
I have not seen until now.

THE TREE

In the side yard of my first home
stands a tree from my childhood,
an old magnolia that reaches out
not for the sky, but for me.

Long ago it bent down to lift me
into its safety-
me and my coke and peanuts.
I sat high and mighty
and pronounced judgement
on those below.
I even crossed the branches
once
to walk on the roof,
until the fat man
that lived under the eaves
chased me back with ugly words
into the refuge of the leaves.

I went there again
to gather its leaves
for the Christmas greenery
and was tempted to climb,
but was unable to grasp
hand over hand
into the past
to the top.



II. MOTHER

HOURS AT THE UNDERWEAR

Hours at the underwear.
Starch and steam and Shalimar.
No creases in the crinolines.
I sit beneath the ironing board
And watch as sheets go sliding
White perfection through her fingers
Ruby tipped and nimble.
Sheets appear and disappear
And blue eyes upside down
A frown that is a smile
Shines through the misty sheers
With perfect seams and hems.
The jingle of her bracelets.
The hissing of the iron.
The back door slams.
It's him again.
So go to sleep
On clean crisp sheets.

DIET

My mother's second attempt at freedom, the first being divorce from my father, was to get rid of the excess baggage under her cream-colored, flawless skin. It was the layer of protection in which she wrapped herself, effectively defending against him. With only minor slip-ups she managed to shed 40 pounds in 4 months on a sensible diet of fish and vegetables. Now if only there were a diet for losing bitterness. She could rid herself of 30 years in 3 months on a steady diet of confidence and a lover's touch.

FORGETTING THE SEA

We forget our mothers as we forget the sea
not remembering darkness and the taste of salt
as we breathe in our liquid air.
Being washed ashore with so much detritus
and blind with sudden light and hunger
are the things that we remember.

Beginnings are painful,
ancestry a tangible fear.
The fish forgot the cell
the lizard the fish
the lemur the lizard
the ape the lemur
and man the ape.

The most difficult words are
"I evolved from here."
The sea, the mother, the darkness
where it is so easy to drown.



GRANDMOTHER

A scarred brown photo says she rode sidesaddle
and wore split leather skirts.

My mother hardly remembers the angel
my grandfather so adored.

Uncle John never knew her.

He sang her death song from the womb.

Her heart was fragile
and the doctor was miles away
when the boy she had longed for
slid into the light and she into that night
where there are no mornings.

The strength of his living could not hold her.

She left him howling and blinking,
while two sisters waited stiffly on the sofa
for some word.

CRANES CREST

JUST ANOTHER FISH STORY

The old woman in the hospital
with the cold eyes
watches absently
as an alley cat
watches
an inattentive bird,
waiting for the second
when she sails in
with claws open,
wanting blood.

I wasn't paying attention
when the subject changed
and I became
"that girl my son raised."
Not granddaughter?
"And isn't it a shame
he has no one
to look after him.
He looks so tired
with his work on the farm
and no one to carry on after him."

Your love
when I was eight
and the poem we wrote together
(about the pet fish)
that won the prize
was after all
just another fish story.
And the blood you are licking
from your fingers
supine matriarch
is mine.

Therefore, because I have no history,
I can choose my own,
not to be one of you
sitting and licking
the grey fur
with its small traces
under the claws
of Union County dirt.

ON SUNDAYS

The woman of the doorstep says
"BASTARD!"
and testifies to the loneliness
sitting on her stoop
on Sunday
with head in hands,
silently counting out
broken promises
to the rhythm of stale gum,
fervently wishing
her life tasted better, too.

CRANES CREST

III. LOVER

CRANES  CREST

PYRAMIDS

We bury old hurts
with the household goods
inside ourselves,
the hieroglyphs
indecipherable,
important organs
kept in jars of unguents
that no longer heal them.



DID YOU ASK?

When your father taught you
to reject the woman
inside
the one that knew you
in the womb.

Taught you to shun the tears
you were born with,
did you not think to ask him,
"Father, how will I deal
with pain
with grief
with love?"

"How will I know need
and desire
except as want
and demand?"

"How will I, Father, know how to live
with the alien gender
I learned is weak and unworthy?"
Your dreams will answer
with a nightmare image
of a vampire bride
who, for want of warmth and blood,
will suck you dry as bone.

CRANESEST CREST

THOSE HANDS I ONCE KNEW

Those hands I once knew
encircle the cup of coffee
as they once encircled me
for warmth and renewal.
We sit in my kitchen and play
at archaeology,
digging up shards
bones
and shattered glass.
We are relics now,
the cracks form
along our hands
and faces.
The dirt from the pit
that we dug from the past fills in around us,
the treasure played out
of the long search,
and the seekers move away.

CRANES  CREST

AT NIGHT

At night
when you are gone
darkness breathes heavy,
bearing shadows.
Courage fails
and the sky is a well
where the pail brimfull of fear
is lifted to the surface.

At night
alone
I feel for the strength
of blue steel
and polished wood
an I become the terror.
I am pure and ancient instinct
waiting for the footstep
on my threshold.

CRANES  CREST

THE HAMMER

I have used my words
like a hammer
to beat my way through
to men's hearts,
but there was no
breaking in.

Until I came to you
and found
my hammer
useless
against eggshell.

CRANES  CREST

FIREDOG

Firedog, you cradled
my burning body
until it fell away
to ash.

Your metal
stood the heat
and hammering heart.
You are stronger
than I am hot,
immune to smithing.



COME BACK BEFORE THE SHEETS BEGIN TO COOL

The place where you lay is still warm
and the candles have turned to pools.
My fingers leave soft trails in wax
as they did upon the moisture of your thighs.

Come back before the sheets begin to cool
and my lips cease to swell and sting.

The cat returns before you
to sleep in your warm imprint.
The candles are trying to gutter.
Your scent and the sweet smoke hover.

Come back before the sheets begin to cool
and my lips cease to swell and sting.



IV. VOICES

THE INVISIBLES

Invisible voices of the past
come tumbling
from the mind
like old clothes
that need discarding.

But I can't dispose
of comfortable things,
even though there are holes
in the pockets
where I keep important
things
like hopes
and wishes
and promises---

So I fold the precious
tattered whispers
of old lovers
back upon themselves
for another day.

TO PRETEND

Where are the sacred places
to which I would go alone
while still a child-
the castle in the rock,
the cave in the muscadine vines
the river in the farmer's stream?

To sit with clearest vision
down among the old oaks
while acorns beat down
around the princess
trapped and waiting
for the sound of hoofbeats.

IN THE SINGULAR

I have lived in the singular
since I was six
with an eye turned inward
constantly watching
the revolving door in my heart
spin out

spin out

spin out

spit out
the fathers
and lovers
and friends.

In need of renovation!
Bring me a new door
opening inward
that closes firmly
behind!

NORMAL ADDICTIONS

Why can't I be victim
to the normal addictions
like drugs
or booze?
For these you can be admitted
to cool rooms
off clean, white corridors
in the city hospital.

There you are cleansed
and go through withdrawal
from the terrible need
for the evil taste
of incredible want.
And the gentle nurse comes
and wipes from your face
and trembling hands
the tears and saliva.

Then the psychiatrist
and the doctor
tell you requirements
for continued improvement,
for the day you walk out
of the corridors
and squint at the light
knowing you must
avoid the thing
you desire most.

Oh, yes, I can see it,
my walking to the window
and saying, "Excuse me,
but I need admittance
to your institution
because I am seeking
the cure for addiction
to the past."

DEAD BALL

Voices
on the phone
and I became a catalyst
for your two hates
overhearing the words,
"Are you naked?"
when I was fifteen
and trembling at my door
hearing you say,
"Leave the key above the blind,"
your unfaithfulness clear.

Voices
in the courtroom
and angry stares
from your family
who found me guilty,
instead,
of disloyalty
for telling mother
what I couldn't understand.
"Men are not guilty
until they're found out."

Voices
on the phone again
playing the game
that should have ended
when I was fifteen.
Back and forth
with accusations
and complaints
that only ended
when I started to fray
at the edges
and the judges declared,
"Dead ball"

I AM GUILTY OF SHATTERING MIRRORS

I am guilty of shattering mirrors.
Like a Siamese fighting fish rages
at his own image in the silver glass.
The face that stares wide-eyed back
is not me but some entity
that seeks heat and sustenance,
some succubus from Fuseli's nightmare.
I came to sacrifice
and you made of me a vortex
swallowing everything whole.
Mirrors torment me and I shatter them
with fists and screams.
I have faces enough to accuse me.
The million me's at my feet cry out
and I run seeking some
blank walls where no mirror
cowers at my coming.

GREY ON GREY

The face of the moon uncovered
watches the river of fog
flow through the place
where whirring wings fly past
before the eye perceives the shape.

Into the mist the flyer takes the spirit
of one who leaves the valley
but who breathes in,
taking the grey veil with her
to pull around her
on dark and empty streets
and so become invisible.

BLACK SATIN

Black satin flows smooth
where the river once was.
Midnight in the city
and lights from the street above
are dancing on the surface
of the Tennessee
like pearls
against black satin
as it whispers past
the watcher on the bridge
enticing him to cool
evenings forever with
black satin.

SWEET WILLIAM

Sweet William knew the minds of men
Alone in his London rooms,
Too busy to see his friends
Hour after hour, peopling a universe
With madmen
And lovers
And midsummer beasts.

The Virgin Queen had parties
To which courtiers came
But not him.
He stayed in
Knowing the minds of monarchs change
Unlike poor Spenser
Or those who were green with envy
Who hated him for his insight
And his patron and favors,
While they slipped into oblivion
In spite of their Oxford wit.

Blessed are the lonely,
William,
For your clean bones lie
Not with your friends in the Abbey,
But safely where you lived
Your charmed life
Near the willows
By the river's edge.

IN THE DRY SEASON

There is a desert of the mind
where old bones lie
and the mind paints false landscapes.
The selfish dusk holds back the heat.
Memory slithers over dead bird wings,
mute lizard tongues.
Grey sky hovers with the false promise
of rain.
No seed sprouts genius.
No bird breathes song.
The lizard isn't speaking.

WE GREW WINGS

We wanted to be birds,
to fly high above the shingles
on rotting rooftops.
We would not be house wrens.
We would be swallows
dancing their air ballet
at sundown,
finding the lights of the city
soaring beyond the reach
of the highest building
intruding on the horizon.

So we grew wings
and flew beyond the sadness
to where the earth is round
and the prize for flying highest
is release.

VITA

Candance Weaver Wages was born in Knoxville, Tennessee on July 24, 1955. She graduated from Central High School in 1973. The following September she entered the University of Tennessee, Knoxville and received her Bachelor of Science degree in English in 1977. She received her teaching certificate in 1978, at the urging of her mother, so she would have "something to fall back on."

Afterwards, she married and moved to Chattanooga, Tennessee for one long year. The pull of Knoxville brought her home, and she began employment with The University of Tennessee, ending eventually at the Center for Business and Economic Research as Publications Coordinator. When the opportunity arose in 1984, she indeed "fell back" on her teaching certificate and began a satisfying career teaching British Literature and journalism at Farragut High School. Ms. Wages is even crazy enough to take teenagers to Europe with her every year.

The author is a member of the Knoxville Education Association, the National Education Association, the 4th and Gill Street Neighborhood Association, and is a contributing member of numerous animal rights groups. Her one claim to fame is that she has danced on stage with Rudolf Nureyev. She currently lives with her husband in a restored Victorian mansion in downtown Knoxville and hopes to see more fame with her writing.