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Signature Janet Lee Warran

Date May 15, 1987

GETTING TO THE LIGHT
COLLECTED POEMS

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

Janet Lee Warman

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For James William Morgan

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ABSTRACT

This collection consists of approximately forty free-verse poems, primarily autobiographical, which explore childhood memories and relationships with family and others. The sections of the manuscript progress from the darkness of fearful and confusing memories, to glimpses of vision through the darkness, to the light of spiritual liberation. Images of darkness and light recur frequently in the poems.

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INTRODUCTION

This manuscript is the culmination of a lifelong desire to put together a collection of original poetry. Though I have done this for years--written poems and collected them for friends--it was always a purely personal undertaking and never quite satisfied me. In graduate school, specifically here in the writing program at The University of Tennessee, I found that I could devote time to my writing and could take it seriously. To my delight, my poems were also taken seriously by others. Because of this, I was able to concentrate on the craft of writing, not just the effusion of feelings onto paper, and found that my commitment to please myself and to communicate with others grew steadily.

The poetry of Sylvia Plath first introduced me to the use of autobiographical material as the basis for works of art, and I began Plath-like railing against people and experiences that had turned to nightmares in my life. Such confessional outpourings seemed adolescent, though, and did not satisfy. In the poetry of Sharon Olds I discovered a crafted way of expressing the concerns that I had always wanted to write about--people as human beings in their fears and in their relationships with each other.

In observing and thinking about people with people, I found correlations between ways of looking at relationships and ways of growing spiritually as an individual. It seemed as if those hidden parts of my past, those parts that I had left in the shadows because of their pain, needed to be addressed if I could ever develop in my understanding of self or others. Next it seemed to me as if those glimpses of vision into the truths of life, visions that have been gifts to me since early childhood, also needed attention. When someone's actions or words struck me as significant, it was necessary that I crawl out from under my own darkness and look--look carefully at what it was that I was really seeing. Finally, if I could see and understand others and myself, there was a chance of spiritual and artistic liberation.

Each of these stages--the shadows, the glimpses, and the flights--receives a section in this manuscript because each has been a significant part of my growth as a human being and as a poet. In these sections there is a gradual progression from darkness to light, light being the goal for many of us in the arts--a lightness of vision and a lightness of step.

I. PRESSED INTO A SHADOW

IN SEARCH OF HILLS

Those days on the plains I would drive
for hours in search of hills.
One gentle rise was all I asked
to rock me
one rippled ridge
one slope.
My gaze would wander out
always level, unflinchingly level;
and when I felt that hours or miles had disappointed
enough
I'd turn a grudging U,
my tires throwing dirt onto the edges of some farmer's
field,
say a prayer, cast hope over my shoulder
up to some imaginary height,
then plummet down through blue to dust again.

FEARS

My mother willed me so many fears:
fear of lightning (that paralyzed me
on the auditorium floor
while everyone else left in the storm),
fear of strangers (that made me run home
without breathing when my father's boss
offered me a ride after school),
fear of failure (that caused me to cry
every time I took a test).
But the one fear she forgot was on that sign:
IN CASE OF RAIN, MOVE TO HIGHER GROUND
FLASH FLOOD AREA.

You parked the camper, and I remembered
a Sunday School story--a family
swept along a gully in fifteen minutes
by waves they heard just before they saw.
Discovering a new fear all my own,
"Please," I begged you. "Let's camp on the hill."
And when the first drop doppled on the rooftop
I saw your teeth as you laughed.

MY SISTER'S GRIEF

Her husband would not bury the dog,
the great frozen hulk of a bull mastiff,
still in its pen.

Two nights he came home late, promising,
"Tomorrow," turning off lights she wanted on
to keep the moon from throwing shadows against the
window.

Two nights she could not sleep,
remembering a lonely child
wanting a puppy to roll with,
being told by her mother of
vet bills, neighbors disturbed by barking,
a child whose only means of defiance
was to marry a man her mother hated
and buy a dog she could not bury alone.

OUR FATHER'S WAR

What we knew of our father's war came from the leftover signs:

his partial deafness, his medals in velvet boxes, and pictures.

A young man with a hint of my father's face, in fatigues, his right foot propped on the side of a jeep,

on the back a note: "I've been offered a job when I return--

in Philadelphia--too far away from Richmond and you."

A young woman in a blousy bathing suit posing like Mae West

to help the young man remember or forget.

And the others--starved, puzzled faces pressed to barbed wire,

narrow boards where eight people slept together, square boxes of buildings with smoke still rising from the ovens.

Those were the only stories my father would tell and then not really stories, words

in a voice as soft as his eyes: "Buchenwald--you can't imagine,"

he would say, turning his one good ear away from our questions.

GRANDFATHER'S DEATH

His heart stopped
in the car
a block from their house.
If she had turned her head left
on the way to the bus
she would have seen.
As it was, a neighbor child discovered
on the other side of the half-rolled window
his silent form, bowed perhaps in prayer
for her to find him.

She never drove again,
let her license expire,
and fought with my mother about independence.
The one Sunday my father tried to take her out
to show her that driving is like riding a bicycle--
you never forget--
her hands trembled, and I
hid behind the overstuffed chair,
refusing to go,
fearing that she would kill us all.

GIRL SCOUT CAMP

For little girls used to books
it was a treat that morning
to come upon the white horse
leaning over her just-birtherd colt.
They grabbed my hands--
eyes, mouths, everything wide--
chanting, "Get up. Get up,"
never having seen any wobbly legs
except their own.

But there was stillness:
a bent mare's neck,
a white sack on the green.
I had not met death,
my heels still in childhood,
and offered the only words I could,
"Maybe it's tired.
We'll come again later,"
knowing full well that
while we were hiking
some caretaker would
haul the dead thing off into the woods.

That night
while little girls dreamed
I sat for hours
on that sloped field,
the moon lighting
a spot too vacant,
hearing a cry
from some throat
asking in the only way
that new grief can.

THE EMPTY FIELDS

Words were as hard to find as breaths
on that long drive to the funeral
past farmland just plowed and promising.
Carolyn, her long dark hair shrouding
a face used to seeking out the happinesses,
whispered, "Cows."
"Cows," she said again. "Don't they always
look so sweet with their big brown eyes?"
More than anything I found her cruel then
to think of something other than death,
so cruel that I turned my eyes away in shame;
but now, today, in this black car, I remember
as I scan the empty fields myself.

ELEGY FOR MARIE SHAFER

I was a newlywed the day you died
two states away
and Michael said the car would never get us there.
Our first fight as husband and wife:
I called him names I did not know I knew,
and he screamed, "Go to hell."

I ached to be a child again,
calling you "Shafer," your husband's name,
because I could not say "Marie."
You made my mother jealous,
handing me bowls of ambrosia
over the backyard fence,

letting me sit beside your bathtub
as you washed your drooping breasts
and answered my questions about
things she could not say
as if it were an easy task,
your getting to the truth.

And how I wanted you that day
if only just to share your silence.
I sat on the kitchen floor
watching the shadows darken the tiles
until the day of your death
was yesterday.

HOLDING BACK

I wait until they ask,
then picture your face pale
against the dark green of the chair
when you said those words. I say
as if merely reciting,
"Got married on graduation day,
put him through theology school,
then he decided he was gay."
Their eyes always widen (I count on it)
as they imagine the pain
I have pressed into a shadow.

THE SENTENCE

I have not been a woman
since he turned to other men.
And now the letter comes.
(I knew it would be there behind the door.
The keys shook in my hand to find the lock.)
I bend to meet the doctor's promise
to take what is already lost.
"Slight abnormality . . .
no need to be overly worried . . ."
So easily typed
black words on white paper
making hands shake without the keys.
It is ironic that he knew so long ago
what I today must kneel to see,
not even woman
but a pale shell
with the sea roaring in my ears.

MISS AMERICA

When I see her now,
that young girl that was me
fresh from her first kiss,
I want to hold her.

Her mother calling her into the den
to watch the ten finalists for Miss America
and she, feeling guilty because somewhere
between movies and home had been that
stop in a church's graveled lot
and that kiss.

She, feeling guiltier because she had hated it.
It was like putting her face in a dish of raw oysters
and now there were eels in her stomach
and here was her mother hoping Miss Virginia would win.

She's there in that chair
across the room from the t.v.,
her legs folded under,
holding her breath in the grey light.
I want to cradle her head in my hands,
to tell her of mothers and daughters and kisses
until her lips part, asking,
tasting the wetness
she will come to in desire.

DARK

I remember in the house
next door to my grandmother
the old blind woman
with lead shoes pushing
her cane and her hard black
anchors right into me
as I cringed against
the wall.
They said my crying
frightened her. She hadn't
heard me breathe.

THESE DAYS

These days my head feels like an engine of cold steel
rushing toward the tunnel
and hard to say if the darkness is the tunnel or the
black hulk

seeking it. Inside there will be sterile light,
prim nurses, fat doctors saying, "Face it. Face it.
What is it?"

They see only flat white, while the shadows burrow more
deeply,

building nests in the brain.

I have seen it all. The year I was
the caretaker.

A child, eyes on fire, limbs stiffening
as I pushed a button and calmly called for forces
who carried the screaming half-demon to an empty room,
slammed hands against walls to call forth something live,
then, whimpering to a limp bag on the floor,
would lie, while the guards let the calm take over.
Carried from their boxes, pale, exhausted,
they always turned their eyes downward
knowing that we had seen
the beast.

The first time I hid behind the door
afraid of the approaching soldiers more than the rage.
Still, still I wonder
if I let them bruise my arms
will the beast finally rage itself into silence?
Will the darkness finally become a home?

LONE PIONEER

My mother, so afraid of a place she cannot even picture,
can only see the bruised neck of her strangled niece,
prophesies me in the same way dragged leaden to some
closet,

won't speak to me for days before I go. She knows
I will die out there on the plains, begins her grieving
early. My father warns me, "Leave it alone. Just leave
it alone."

All that my burdened car will hold is all that I carry
with me to my new life. Sometimes along the way it's
snow

that blurs my vision, and I am glad to reach your house,
find that your rooms are filled with books.

A childhood fantasy awaits--to live in a library.

I sit on the faded carpet, legs Indian-style, as you
welcome me by showing your autographed Allen Ginsberg.
Two days later I have realized that it was all books.

Now you see that I want more, and you flinch.

It's not a question of learning about love. You say
you read about that in Hemingway. The words
collide with each other inside my throat.

Hemingway doesn't know you with your turquoise eyes
or me with my family and friends left in Virginia. You
advise me to read Willa Cather. She left Virginia
for Nebraska and made the plains her life. You
tell me I should become a real pioneer. I
leave your rooms and test the soil, hard and flat under
my feet.

The hot wind, the only touch on my cheek, swirls
knee-high clouds of dust around me. Not even
a fantasy could turn them into hills.

II. BETWEEN THE DARKER HILLS

THIS WINTER

This winter I can't sleep
for thoughts of roots
stretching deep
beneath the frozen earth
in search of water,
their hairy fingers
pointing in hope
toward rushing streams.

Some nights
I almost know
that a drop of dew
on the tiniest point
would ease it for me
enough to let go,
enough to let them
find their way alone.

THE MASQUE

Throwing kisses with your eyes
you pirouette off each would-be
lover's words, your ribbons
gently brushing past their cheeks.
They think it is a sarabande,
your version of the dance of death,
and when, tonight, they dream
of maidens in a sea of pearls
you will be dead stone,
canon-fodder under their sighs.

DEATH WATCH

On the bus the law student lounges
his head against the window
talking about his last job--
a mortician's apprentice.
We all turn our eyes down
breathing deeply, knowing
he has a story to tell:
"It's really not hard at all.
You realize soon that bodies are
just mannequins."

In the dream the people push me
through the door to look at my father's body.
I know that the sight of his still head
will send me screaming after him.
They tell me he will move for awhile,
that death takes some more slowly,
so I watch his motions, sluggish as a
run-down wind-up toy,
see his arms lower at a pace
I can learn to know,
watch him glide into stillness.

In my family we are taught
not to give smiles or tears
except in the dark, alone.
I would take these lilies
growing inside me
to my father at his workbench,
but the night calls me with them
to its own black room.

MOTHER

My mother's delicacy
is like that of carrots--
present only when parboiled
and then still tasting
a bit of brass.
I dread her call
on the eve of my birthday
for I know she remembers
the bloody expulsion
rather than the wandering
savorer I became.

CARRIED LOVE

I have come to my grandmother
with love problems.
She sits crocheting an afghan
with that dip and spin, dip and spin motion
I tried to teach my fingers,
spirals of red, green, yellow and brown
bobbing at her feet with each dip.
(Her eyes have lost the subtler shades.)
"He said he loved me,
but I was fourteen,
and the first time I saw your granddaddy
I knew who I wanted.
Even after we were married,
he'd call me every three or four years,
say, 'Lizzie, I still think of you.'
Do you know that old man
even called me after your granddaddy died,
said, 'Lizzie, I still love you.
Do I have a chance now?'
Of course, he waited a respectable time,
but I didn't love him.
I told him so.
He died last year,
never married.
I guess he carried that love
to his grave."

HUNGER

In the cafeteria line
leaning on the arm of my first love
I wished our wedding day would hurry.
The old professor, ex-priest,
who always wore red in academic processions
and recited Chaucer with the tone of bells,
chided me, "Don't wish your life away."

I am divorced ten years now,
the ex-priest dead five.
Would it have come to this less quickly
without that day waiting together to be fed?

FOR MICHAEL

We were young then, sharing
for the first time our fears
about growing old: blindness,
my vision of a dreaded end,
and yours paralysis.
For a while I had dreams,
my own legs stiff and numb,
and you could feel your eyes dim.
We were that much in love
and swore that our closeness
would make the aging easy.
But it is not easy
to read the articles about men
whose organs are wasted by disease
or your letters about counseling
in a community huddled together
against the internal fire,
and it is not easy
to think of your young lover,
foolishly jealous of our two years
so many years ago,
having to be the one to tell me
that no amount of closeness
could keep you with us.

WEARING DOWN

In the early days when you kneaded my emotions
I would soften down under your knuckles chanting,
"I will rise. I will rise."
But you are still kneading,
my chant becoming a whimper,
your palms bruising my flesh.

SKELETONS

Knotted niceness
is turning us into skeletons
hanging paper thin
praying for still air.
One subtle shift
makes death rattles
of the silences we have set.

TALKING TO THE MUD

You say that you would rather talk to the mud
than to your son.
Would you slam your fist into it,
splattering brown drops to the trees, the fence posts,
anywhere to get away?
Or would you sit beside it
whispering your story
and wishing it would turn to solid earth?

THOSE WOMEN

I always wondered how those women
could love the men on death row,
sneaking cookies and kisses between the bars,
holding candlelight vigils the night before the
execution.

I pictured them lacing their fingers around the
noosemakers',
laying their cheeks on chests that had pinned old women,
desperate to have to turn for love
to those who claimed their bounty with a knife.
I always wanted a man like my father--
idealized gentle goodness without end--
had no idea that you were waiting for me
to fill your life with sending me flowers,
slapping your children's smooth faces
and kicking your dog in her soft flanks.

THE ACT

When you turned away
I tried to offer petals
cover it up with soft pink
hardly hush of rustling
but between the puffs
a spear of broken glass
split the corners of my mouth.

AT THE EDWARD WESTON EXHIBIT

I always come to these exhibits now,
as though genuflecting at the door.
If asked I would say that
during that year you taught me
to appreciate photography.
If pushed, I might admit
that I am still seeking answers.
Your letter
unanswered for three months
has brought me here today.

Weston has captured the poses
of nudes and shells,
delicately smudging
every female's lines.
If form were everything--
but dust speaks
next to the crisp edges
of seashells
calling to be caressed.
I suspect the one
opening white velvet
between the darker hills
is an image of my own sex.

An old box camera waits
in the center of the room
for the uninitiated to discover
how tricky it must be
to see the image upside down
and know that it will bloom
in perfect proportions
when righted.
How many Sunday afternoons
I stood behind you,
that black cloth over your head,
or watched you close
the darkroom door
to burn in private.

Your letter opened with poetry,
your way of admitting
there were gifts from my life too.
Perhaps I will answer
in black and white:
"Weston sullies the seductive,
sensualizes the mute."

SEASONS

Too long on the plains, I had forgotten the scent.
Suddenly Magnolia. I could have made it my couch:
dark green, rounded enough to swallow me.
Every muscle loosened, feeling Home. Touching South.
No time to savor, I lightened and moved on.

Today a flat heart drew me back to that tree.
Today I would have taken time, let it hold me.
But, late summer, the leaves smelled of heat.
Sticks for branches poked through plucked patches.
My stiffening lines retold the story of the plains life.

ARAB WOMAN

Even in hot summer
transplanted from her own soil
she still must wear those long robes
the color of drying tobacco leaves
or muddy waters.
Forced by stares to walk a straight line
she wavers a bit as the rain starts
holds her hand high
silently opening the pink petals.

MEN

They have seen me
lie in the shallow
belly of a canoe,
but still they force me
out onto the river,
their arms reaching upward to
the cracks of white,
calling the tinsel down
to settle it
all for me:
head

 hands

 spine

 doubt

 awe

in a soldered instant.

They should see
I want it to dawn in muted shadings,
gradually taking me up and up and up.
I want to prepare myself to face the final starburst,
letting my atoms soak it in at the water's edge,
not to surrender
with one sharp slap,
to open
and close
before the thunder
even sounds.

III. IN THE MORNING LIGHT

CAPTURED FIRE

The fireball inside my brain
sends molten lava down my throat
to harden into stones
settling and shifting
inside my stomach,
scorches the inside of my skull
until every moist bit of concentration burns away,
narrows through my right eye socket
to a needlepoint of laserlight
battling with the sun
and raging at the sound
of voices or passing cars.
I press my head into the dark
angle of the corner,
begging the cells of my flesh
to merge with the atoms of the wall,
willing the incessant lightning
to become cool, flat, invisible.

TIME

Lean toward me with your new beard
after a six weeks' column of air between us
and sparkle with intent to charm
not knowing

I have had other stubble pressed against my cheek.
Liquored breath panted syllables of nonsense
always echoed by your name.
I moved along the streets in numb ease.

Lean toward me with your new beard
thinking you are suitor still
while I see street derelict in your eyes
and feel myself smooth Grecian stone.

THERE IS A WAY

There is a way to master this pain,
a way the Indian women used
when the blood seeping from them
called them to the earth.

They let the knife pierce sharp through,
opened their legs to it,
arched their breastbones over it,
and dove off onto the wind.

But you have pinned me.
Shoulder to the hard ground,
I can open
but not ride.

Calling the doves into the trees
to settle so thickly
they block the wind,
I float with the ashes.
We are petals on the ox-bow lake.

MASTERING WATERS

My father tells the story this way:
He was a reluctant swimmer.
Truth is he would not swim at all,
and so his brothers threw him in.
The Kanahwa Canal is not deep
but deep enough. He found
as he felt his head beneath the waves
for the third time
the will to reach the shore
and thrashed his way back
to those naughty boys
laughing because they'd taught their lesson well.

Years later
when he had mastered waters
I had not
the undertow caught us both.
I could not hear his shouts above the waves
as he instructed me to lunge in rhythm,
and so I bowed my head into the wet cushion
and gave myself to it.
Feeling what he must have
on that other awful day
we torpedoed to shore and my mother,
who laughed and said, "You weren't in any trouble out
there."

This time so different:
The one who threw me in
expects to see me drown,
perhaps even hopes for it.
Helpless, I beat the water with my fists
until I remember
my father taught me how to swim,
and so I make that gentle turn.
Back to the water, face to the sun
I float to shore.

IN FLIGHT

About to leave your home for the first time
you bow your head and baby-bird-like whisper
of your fears. I remember my own
dark days in flight alone, and I tell you,
"The wind. Sometimes the wind will hit you
like a cold wall, but you must use it.
Make it carry you. Make it hold you.
Make it your flight's source."

THE HEALING

When you came to me, fresh
refuse of your lover's madness,
you heard rantings from her drugged lips,
lowered your hands and eyes
to that battered sack that had become you.
I cowered under the arches of your loss
fingering like a rosary her leavings.
Day-by-day I said your name
until
tonight, rising above me
hands, anchors by my side
you lower your eyes again
and watch our motion as if
mesmerized. You throw your head
back, in fearless nakedness
and laugh for joy, your gift to me.

OCTOBER SOLACE

It has become my great October myth:
Someone always comes or goes with the first chill,
breeding a space for expectation,
turning to dead ice long before winter.
This year, in protest to my myths of everything,
you left a month early.

Hard task it was, finding ice enough in the warm days,
my own heart keeping me.
October today, I opened my door to a cold wall,
turned inside to find my worn shawl
and danced around the space that was you.

TENNESSEE DOGWOODS

In Virginia it is illegal to pick the dogwoods,
but here they keep them in vases on their tables,
feeling something perhaps about beauty and the people.

I laughed the first time I heard about the Dogwood Trails,
streets with pink arrows leading cars through blooms.
Early March, I saw only roads and branches.

Last year your father died the week the blossoms opened;
you picked some for your mother and his grave.
This year I drove the trail the day you left.

I think in Tennessee they have it right,
the being able to hold a branch of pink against a cheek
or see a flock beside the bed in the morning light.

FOR ROD EIGHTEEN YEARS AFTER VIETNAM

Tonight you call to explain:
Your girlfriend had an abortion.
You needed time alone. But more.
In Vietnam a child hit with a grenade,
hit with your grenade, died.
Nobody's fault, the investigators said.
The child should not have walked through crossfire.
"She had an abortion," you tell me,
"and I can't bring that baby back
any more than I can breathe life
into those bones in Vietnam."

I'm taken back eight years
to your sister's wedding.
Meeting again, both divorced,
we danced around common histories,
sharing wine, healing wounds.
You took me across a one-lane bridge
down a hill of green vine
to your canoe spot on the river
and tried to tell me about Nam.
I couldn't keep walking, hugged you to me,
seeing too much jungle on that August afternoon.
"The war," you laughed, "was nothing."

Somehow I knew, though,
whenever I would try to match your steps
it hurt too much
to bring the limping home,
and every time you'd turn from me
I'd feel not quite as numb as you.
Tonight the guns are quiet.
We reach through eighteen years,
pushing back every branch that comes between,
clearing whatever path we can.

REBIRTH

I sense the edges of the sun dimming
before the darkness descends,
feel myself alone with the gods,
wanting to be a wounded animal,
to pull the black fringes over me.

The air may be as clear
as handblown crystal
but the drums behind the trees
make it thicken
like spectacles for the nearly blind,
slow my pulse to a pace that is not its own.

No guilt-blood here,
I rest with the rhythm.
Liquid filling my mouth,
I taste the fire
and leap into the woods.

VITA

Janet Lee Warman was born in Richmond, Virginia, on April 27, 1953. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Emory and Henry College in 1975 and a Master of Education degree in special education/emotional disturbance from Virginia Commonwealth University in 1981. She received a fellowship from the National Endowment to the Humanities to study at Hollins College during the summer of 1983 and studied English at The University of Nebraska in Omaha from 1984 to 1985. From 1985 to 1987 she studied at The University of Tennessee, where she was a graduate teaching assistant and earned a Master of Arts degree in English with Writing Emphasis.

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