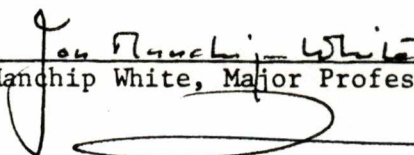
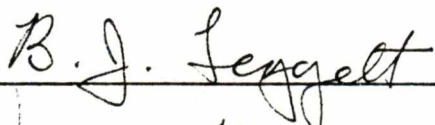
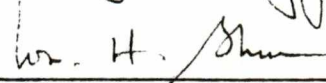


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Date

6/88

DRAGONS NEVER SLEEP

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Sheri D. Walker

June 1988

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I would also like to thank my family for their support and love through years and years of growing and changing.

Finally, the English department secretaries, including Lois Franssen at Arizona State University, deserve a note of appreciation for their patience and endurance.

ABSTRACT

The poems found in "Dragons Never Sleep" are divided into five sections and deal mainly with memory and relationships. The poet begins with childhood in the first section, recalling her relationship with parents and grandparents. Sections two, three and four explore her relationship with herself, with lovers, and with women, respectively. The final section is a conglomeration of relationships, including friends, lovers, acquaintances, strangers, self and one cat.

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INTRODUCTION

It is the nature of poetry to attempt to describe the universal through personal experience. For example, a poet writes down particular details that describe that poet's perceptions, which are personal. But readers bring their own experiences to a poem and are reminded of their own perceptions while they become acquainted with the poet's. This is what makes poetry universal--that sharing of experience through recall and comparison.

But why poetry? Why not prose--autobiography, nonfiction, essay? Why poetry?

Because poetry has the advantage of form, which is part of the experience. Poetry is music, rhythm, visual effect. Poetry partially reveals its meaning simply by the way it appears on the page. And through the use of symbolism and metaphor, poetry can say in just a few words what might take pages of prose to discuss. In this sense, poetry is ordered.

It is not only form that gives poetry order--poetry also has "internal" pattern. It pulls images together and makes connections among them, demanding that readers at least acknowledge these connections, even if they don't understand or agree. Ideally, readers do understand, and they see some of their own experiences and connections reflected in the poet's.

This brings me to the manuscript, "Dragons Never Sleep," which deals with the patterns of relationships. It is for the most part autobiographical, beginning in Part One with my relationship with

my father, seen from my perspective later in life. The relationship was unfulfilling and short-lived and set up a pattern of failure for relationships that followed. Part Two begins the exploration of these other relationships, in a desert setting, which is both actual geographical location and inner landscape, or state of mind. Part Three deals specifically with relationships with men; Part Four, with women. And Part Five is a hodgepodge of relationships with various people and situations that reveals more about self-actualization and less about the relationships themselves.

Of what significance is this journey through relationships? It is a conscious effort to use the discipline of poetry writing to tap what is universal in my own personal experience. Yes, it is a self-discovery. Yes, it is therapeutic. Yes, it is (horrors) "confessional."

But it is also a reflection of what I have learned, both psychologically and stylistically, over a period of years. It is a scholastic endeavor as well as an emotional one.

I believe good poetry gives something--to writer and reader alike--that can be useful, and even, perhaps, remembered. It is with this belief that I leave you with "Dragons Never Sleep."

I

THE BEGINNING

PONIES

When I was seven
I learned about ponies--
the way their eyes round out
from the sides of their heads,
the proud "S" of their necks.

There must have been a hundred
in the sparse field behind our house
in Defuniak Springs--
Shetlands with names like
Pepper and Velvet,
wild with the red foxes
and the red ants.

That was so long ago,
and tonight the city stretches out before me
like needles
like necks
like the long necks of
horses
now that I'm older.

CONFESSIONS

(1)

I hide in a bathroom and cry
and call it panic
(the private breakdown)
while you sit at home and feel
god knows what,
something
that comes out hard and brittle
over the phone.

I go away
to the back of my mind
where an eight-year-old child
hides
from a dead alcoholic father.
It feels safe there,
cool and smooth,
like the grey tiles of the new
library's bathroom,
where the adult faces the child,
the familiar struggle
where they both lose.

(2)

What if I write a poem I can't face?
My father keeps calling me backward
the curtain comes down, I'm
on the stage in the dark,
there is no audience.
I face him but I don't
see him, I pretend he's not really
there.

"Come here," he says,
"let's see your titties."

A screen door bangs open
and Mother stares hard at us
both.

Twenty years later
I draw your face away
from my breasts, though you are not
like him, you are

CONFESSIONS [cont.]

tall and blonde, your eyes
clear and blue.

You are not like him,
but the child resurrects fear,
the child turns away,
I can't let her go, I
follow.

(3)

November swirls high
into the blues, violets and golds
of the evening.
I sit outside until my hands grow numb,
waiting for football traffic to thin.

I think of you
at home with your typewriter,
your thin face,
hollow and unaccepting.

I'd tell you everything if you
wanted me to,
spill out the
last childish sob,
cough it up like bones if you'd
smile.

For now I am content
to watch small black birds
wheel and circle over the plaza,
to put off confrontations,
to go on hiding.

WAKING

Sleep peels away from me like dead
skin, the charred, scarred nerveless
epidermis rolling
back in one thick
layer leaving
inner layer open
pink
exposed

and I remember.

DEEP BREATHING

You must learn to relax when you're awake,
he told me.

I imagined myself in sleep
curled tight as a marble,
clenching around an energy that took me forward so fast my teeth
rattled when I walked.

It was an old story:
my father in the morning,
casual and still as the forty-four
that later silenced his hangover.

Two years later
my grandfather propped his head
against that same smooth
cylindrical barrel.

He asked me to pull the trigger.

Outside the three-thirty-five
tore through its tunnel
of darkness and steel.

So you must learn to relax, the man was saying again,
offering me a colored pamphlet
with the address of a chapel,
the dates of free vegetarian meals,
a phone number.

I tucked the pamphlet into my pocket,
remembering once again to breathe,
the rip of oxygen through my lungs,
that old metallic taste of new
blood.

DUST

You drank Falstaff,
the "thirst quencher,"
sprinkled salt on the top
of the can,
you were such a comical man.
That's what they said at your funeral.

Others say you took
the easy way out.
That suicide is for chickens.
That you'll never get to heaven.

I never understood about
fathers and alcholism.
But I did try to understand
suicide. And
I want to scream out in your defense,
into the hurt and frustration
into the empty spot that should have been you.

Instead I laugh
while my mind routes itself along that path
of flat lands and evergreens,
stretching always toward that tiny church
nestled into obscurity,
where the Spanish moss hangs thick
around the gravestones,
and the rusted man beneath
disturbs hard sands
with his old grumblings.

DADDY

Were you really
a faithless son of a bitch
frequenter of bars and drunk tanks
embarrassment to Independent
Life and Accident?

Mother doesn't talk much about it.
"After all," she says,
"he was your father."

What I really want to know about
are the times an iron skillet
was Mother's only defense against you.
Why shreds of her blonde hair and pink
nightie could sometimes be found
among the roaches and the centipedes.

Bail money finally
got the best of us all.
It wasn't the gas hose found once
in your Galaxie Five-Hundred.
Not liver disease or arteriosclerosis or
fatality by dee-double-you-eye.

Jobless at last,
checking account overdrawn again
to pay your bond,
you let the forty-four
rape the insides of your skull,
blood streaked like warpaint
across your blue tennis shoes.

You thought you'd save us
from the raw-veined obscurity
of your mahogany perspective.
You really thought you'd save us.
Didn't you?

THE MOON

clings to black
pines its face
marred.

Southern summer rises
out of hot sands and childhood
meeting the cold fire
of thunder and rain.

One late car passes,
the slow crunch of tire on gravel,
the long stroke of high beams

reaching

beyond the pines and the strong pull of
tides, where the gulf gives up its
calcium treasures

and the moon
with no trees to hold to
dips its mottled face
against the dark curve
of water.

SKETCHES

(1)

The hard part
is getting stuck somewhere
where you've nothing to do.
I pull out a pad and pen,
pretending to be busy,
wondering who to call.

Maybe I should try it alone this time,
like the old days, I think,
sipping my coffee--
Grandpa's face swims before me,
the downward set of his mouth when he
poured his coffee into the saucer,
waiting for it to cool,
the smooth withdrawal into
the mind.

The old days, I think,
when I wasn't afraid of being
alone.

(2)

Grandma made biscuits from
scratch each morning,
rolling out the dough on the
red checkered cheesecloth,
cutting out the biscuits with a
flour-covered glass.

I was up, too,
with the rooster's thin cry,
standing around the old
square kitchen table,
leaning on my elbows till it
came my turn
to ease the glass down
through the slowly setting dough.

Breakfasts were not
the only affair:
there were chicken coops out back
chopping blocks and sheds,
rows of new corn

SKETCHES [cont.]

stretching away through the fields,
and the beans,
nestled around their feet,
waiting for the room to grow.

(3)

Daddy

I've written poems about you
that weren't quite true,
about hard sands and flat
lands, when in fact
the sand is
soft and smooth and blonde
on the old farm
where you grew up.
Hard sand was easier to hate.
It didn't allow for the weakness
of roots that kept getting
washed to the surface,
the confusion of a father
who killed himself.

I'm alone in this restaurant
on my third cup of coffee,
and it still matters,
while the black and white tiles
merge into the red and green walls
and the high grey strip around the ceiling
and the bill already waiting
on the table.

II
THE DESERT

BETWEEN THE GREY

(1)

Darkness and light
you try to separate them
I eat a plain tuna fish sandwich and keep
walking.

"Beauty," you say
"is the moonlight on your face
here, in the desert--
and by the way,
how long have you studied Zen?"

"Less than a year," I say absently
trying not to make the connection
knowing my whole life has been a preparation
for this moment.

(2)

We pause in a thicket
lie flat on rocks and pretend
there is no desert.
"Other people are the shadows," you say,

And I try to imagine a world
in which shadow is not synonymous
with darkness.

(3)

Coming back to the city in our new skins
yours looks too small but matches
your blue eyes perfectly.

"The space between here and the moon is also
the moon," I say
exhaling smoke into the night.

"The shadow is also the light," you say,
knowing that you still don't think so,
knowing we are going home to separate beds.

NOT DIVING

after Adrienne Rich

This is the hand that
untied the knot
stretching the questions out
between pieces of frayed rope
rock and limb colliding
in water
in darkness.

I go down through the darkness
fully extended
pretending to know more than I
really do.
Down and down
past the few missing planks of the old
bridge,
the sweet smell of moss
heavy and clinging.

I think back--
what was I doing in the middle of the desert?
Testing bombs?
Looking for a common language?

I passed through line after line
of shaded bodies
with shaded eyes--
they all looked away.

I tried talking
with the men and the women--
out in the desert,
no one talks.

And now I am here,
climbing down into this wreck.
My hands grow numb with cold,
crack and tear along the pale tender webs
between my fingers.

The darkness gathers me up.
The water stays my hand--
rock and limb colliding
rock and limb colliding.

DREAMING

last night in sleep
i ran and ran
(bare feet in grass)
pursued by men

on walls too high
(afraid to leap)
my muscles tensed
from holding back

through empty streets
on darkened pavement
weaving color
sound and rain
my voice a passage
for the music

last night's dreaming
breathed me in

FORMS

"Just give me a few days," he said,
"to get my life in order."

And then what, she thought--
he would bloom like a tadpole
into the man she wanted?

Under the glistening
of stars and fireflies
he pulled her to him
once, twice.
Look, she said,
what is it you want?

"I don't want you to give up on me,"
he said,
sitting down awkwardly on the smooth flat rocks
by the water's edge. Fish rippled vaguely
under the surface,
first one, then two.
"I don't want to move too quickly," he said.
"I don't want to fuck this up."

He seemed to hold his breath
all the way back
to the parking lot.

Now he sits against plush burgundy interior,
tugging at his beard with his left hand,
searching the space around him for
the words,
the right words,
any words.

"Just a few days,"
he is saying.

A few days.

DESERT FISH

You're taking this far too
personally, he said
folding himself stiffly
onto the green quilt.

She tumbled his words
to the music of her guitar,
vibration of steel
against leaf and sky.

Too personally, her mind hummed.

Okay, I'm sorry, he said
an attempt at the old magic
the softening of the voice
the intensity of the blue eyes
a mirage in the slow sand
of his face.

She stood then,
the calm statement
of movement.

You haven't seen the last of me
he called after her.

No, she thought,
just the back,
humming as she went
shaking the evening off
the shabby quilt.

DESERT GIRL

She sits with lit candles
 waiting
while the silver moon stretches
 like a small hand
 stroking
the neighbor's green-eyed cat.

"La gata, mi amor," she whispers,
 bending the lines of her body
 away from the window,
 burying her face
 in the mottled fur.

The window catches her reflection:

She is clean and off balance,
 vague as a December evening,
 bare and curling into sleep,
as she fills herself up
 with the steel blue sheen
 of winter.

III
THE MEN

BLUE MORNINGS, BLUE DAYS

Creeping out of bed before you
I turn the music on low,
sip ginseng tea
from a blue ceramic mug.

My mind still flirts with morning,
imagines itself still pressed deeply
into cool feather pillows.
Later I let it drift
like the turquoise shell of the bath oil bead
coming to rest at the bottom of the tub.

Evenings are never mine anymore, I think,
in the late lull of the fickel winter sun.
I sit on a blue afghan and watch
while winter makes its slow circle,
bleeding through the dark veins
of bare trees.

Evenings are never mine.
They get stacked with letters
and poems
and entire books that might have been
written.

But some words never get spoken,
like forgiveness,
like love,
like the line of definition where you leave off
and I begin.

MORNING

So relieved to be inside
I found the warmest spot
and burrowed down deep
heart beats slowed
against bone and sinew

I woke to sun
through green plastic blinds
a slab of wood beneath me

And you beside me
your body curled into
fetal position, your hands
moist and
clinging

CLEAR WATER

Today I saw you without a cigarette,
your hair still stubbornly unwashed
your jeans patched and loose.

I thought of things I hadn't said before
about the power of passion that consumes
like a bad seed splintering.

How easily I see now
the white light of winter
through bare trees and fogged windows
fractured against floors and ceilings.

The snow coming again this way reminded me.

The snow coming
 again this way
 reminded me.

SEED

Perhaps it's because your
name's not there,
bitter and curling
in on itself like
smoke from sulfuric
acid, smoke from one of the
sixty cigarettes you
beat your lungs with
every day to
keep from
changing.

Maybe it's because you
keep turning up,
the sleight-of-hand
man, the bad
penny
your lies sharp and serious
as the gaze that held me for
twenty-eight days.

It's all behind me now
but I still remember.
You were real
like Peter Piper, his
pumpkin insides
barely connected, the
stringy seeds still
intact.

OFFERING

Craig sleeps with one eye open
and drools on my pillows.
But he is a good lover, more
woman than I am with his
long hair and flared
hips. His body softens into lovemaking like
mine should, and when I ask him to leave
he holds me tighter.
Tomorrow he will sleep in
while I clean up after the cats
and move like dreams through the
small front room. It is too
soon. I won't relax until he's
gone.

PHOTOGRAPH

You brilliant-blue-eyed bastard you
come speeding with the blur
of a yellow Porsche
through the night and
into my life.

I wasn't even looking
but you made me notice
spitting ice-blue fire
at me until
my own eyes watered
and my head spun.

And there in my state of bedazzlement
oh indigo eyes
I sat and marvelled
that the absence of pigment
could be so rewarding
yet not revealing--

I was misled.

What do you want from me?
Or should I say, with me?
For surely you hold me
by your sky-hued power
and each time we meet
is a rediscovery.

Blind me--captivate me--overtake me
with that glittering sapphire-gaze
of lapis lazuli
unblinking
impenetrable
hermetically sealed against my
star-struck wonder
against my hazel watch.

JEWEL

There were others before you.
They broke me open
along veins
in fragments
chipping away at
rough edges like
bad sleep or
sharp teeth.

I healed.

(in the bright hot light
of the white hot night
oh child of gleam
oh dream baby)

Then you held me up
lifting and turning me
smoothing and shining me
so softly polishing

(oh golden gleam
oh child of dream)

and then you sold me.

HAIR

It was longer than hers was
and he was too careful with it,
putting a hesitant hand up to
stroke it, afraid to wash it for fear
it would fall out.
When he asked her if she would trim it,
his voice was hushed, reverent,
as if he were asking her to die for him.

She knew it had to happen.
She had prepared herself days ago after his
"sharing-a-common-center" speech:
"I have everything you need," he'd said then,
"these rose gold rings from Russia, these
vitamins and pills, a dick you can
talk to. I want to fill your belly with my
seed. Our children will, of course, eat
red meat."

They struggled on the kitchen floor.
She thought of Adrienne Rich, of
Aunt Jennifer's tigers hacked up like
lambchops, seared on both sides, while
tiny squalling faces around her cried

(mamma)

"Just enough to get the dead ends," she said,
fingering the cool metal of the scissors
inside her pocket. She pulled the long strands
back into a tail, tilted his head sideways,
noticed the paleness of the
skin on his
neck.

"Just the dead part," she said again,
(just like my mamma showed me)

GENRE

I scrawled you verbatim
in the Great Note Pad
of my memory
and conjured you up as a reference
every chance I got.

There were pages and pages
on your green eyes and tight body
your preference for black cars
the way you said goddammit.

I was sure you would remain there forever
like the protagonist in a melodrama
the hero in a Gothic novel
one of the good guys in white.

Funny how I've grown since then--
no longer writing fiction.

IV
THE WOMEN

RAIN SUMMONS

perfume
the murgence of color
opening and closing of doors
in my veins

a rush of wind turns me to quick-
shadow
coming round again to the same
line

I inhale Western tradition
through my right nostril
mingle it with sleep and
rhythm
to create myself over

I invoke the clam music
of overlapping realities
with rose colored sweaters
and paisley scarves

coming home again like children
to coffee and grandmothers
roosters and green rugs

the smell of summer rain on hot sidewalks

sand

stopping
the creation of transition
the loss of definition
the meaning of the word
remember
the movement of body
in sound

INSTAR

The pelvis tilts
away from meeting
when the woman has learned how to
hate
herself.

Afterwards she moves around off
balance, bones gone
sour
that precarious grinding
when she walks.

Oh do not weep for her.
The pelvis knows best.
It will tilt forward again and
heal
when the body has spun itself out from
the back
when the past has lost its
attachment
when the focus has moved away
clear.

XXV

after Emily Dickinson

I dream a Deeper Hue
To accentuate the Light--
To fill in brightened corners
With the fluid Shades of night--

To Contrast with the Shadows
A Water-Colored Sun--
And Lie stretched In Between
With a Hand in either One.

OLD GAUZE

There will be many afternoons like this one, she thought
smiling to herself from the quilt-covered bed.
Didn't the sun come through those windows
in that same precise manner last
autumn?

Plenty of time
to watch shadow patterns
on the gold carpeting
the white wooden cabinets
the dark-grained furniture she had hauled back and forth
across the U.S.
in a rented truck.

She snuggled deeper into the feather pillows
breathing in their familiar smell.

The wind rustled through the curtains
the sun still warm and golden
against the first brown
leaves.

song of the indian maiden

strong woman gleaming
bright golden, he said
come let me touch you
i will not harm you

(water on rock
thumb against forehead
words stretching out across
wet winter sun
they did not reach her)

strong woman gleaming bright
golden, he said

(crystal clear chamomile
waiting like summer
shadow of yearning
glint of desire)

come let me touch you
i do not fear you

(words stretching out
across wet winter sun
they did not reach her)

strong woman gleaming bright golden, he said
come let us see
what we have to share
i will not harm you
i do not fear you
come let me touch you
come let me love you

(forged like aluminum
ruffle of evergreen)

strong woman gleaming
strong woman gleaming

CALYPSO

She sits on the rocks
and tosses her long hair.

When ships pass,
though she throws herself into the water
and pretends she is drowning,

no one leaps in to save her,
no one she can bind
through love
or obligation.

I saw her wavering and beautiful
in the depths, and I tried
to turn away.
I gripped the iron railing till my
knuckles turned to stone.

But my heart cried out to save her,
the woman with the long hair,
the woman with my face.

PRINCESS

Once there was a girl
who liked some lines of her poetry
so much
she put them in poem after poem.

"It works here," she'd say,
quiver, pale and cornered,
on her lower lip.

We watched her swirl away in tears once
from a spilled coke.

We knew she felt safe
in the world of her poetry
living there while the dark hair
grew all over her body,
weaving her words fine and delicate,
waiting for the spring.

MAIDEL

"Let it go," you tell me
in the stillness of summer evenings.
"I won't talk about it anymore.
"I hate her."

I filter you down
past bitterness and jealousy,
the fights with your mother,
her power, your
freedom.
I filter you down and you

take up my depth and
walk. . .
a different kind of Lady Lazarus
a different kind
of fire. . . .

"Let it go,"
you say again.
"It'll be all right.
"I'll get over it."

But your eyes,
deep blue and wounded,
say

I'll be going away to Mexico soon.
I won't need you then.

MAIDELSONG

Tonight the moon was orange and I
thought of you, how both of us
became more like you
as you were leaving.

We had so few words to say that were
alive.

But red petals still lie against
glass, and green leaves still
grow.

And I miss the way your toes clutch
at the earth as you
pass.

NOT THE CAR ITSELF,
BUT THE FACT THAT IT'S THERE AT ALL

I pause among slender birches,
stretching my hip sockets,
and marvel at the small brown
ginkgo leaf, spread like a webbed
foot in early February.

The buzz of a white Scirocco
waiting at the curb
keeps me from relaxing.

I peer through the trees
at the girl inside--
her sphere-shaped earrings
large and gold,
the ash on her cigarette
long and curved.
She holds it out the window,
not smoking,
staring ahead.

A horn honks
and the high whine of a motorcycle
zips by too fast.

The sun is warm
and the girl in the white car
smiles as she drives away,
blending into movement like a
sigh.

FISH A LA MODE

Because I was bored with being self-conscious
weary with the clenching
of my pelvis when I walked
 (as if it might betray me)

I swiveled carelessly today
the flamboyance of my navel pulling
eye
 after
 eye
the hollow glass tube of my center
filled with light
 (flowing)

V
THE SELF

RED INK

Delusions of grandeur,
they call it in sophomore psychology,
this fantasy that one clean martial
movement would end forever the slurred
insults.

Or that one burning look
would set people ablaze
while I watch them turn to ashes
at the toes of my Birkenstocks.

I spend a lot of time
in my imagination this way,
merging through shades of indigo
to peacock blue,
sorting through small dark corners
where dust lies waiting
like the sleep
of the sane.

FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Still at war--Kilty--
with that edge in your eye.
You stand at the top and leap
soar like an eagle over
napalm glaze.

You never come down.

But you came out.
I watched you climb out of your own mind
compromising heat and smoke with a
cigarette
and a cup of coffee.

Then a beer.

It is the fear--Kilty--
makes the pain overwhelming.
You swallow love like marbles
hard spheres of uncertainty
that pass through hollow tubes
unabsorbed.

You measure distances
with a red bandanna
and long hair.

Open wide--Kilty--and chew
healing yourself with your own lack of courage,
filling yourself up with the cold.

PATTERNS

In the shadow leaf
of the big fig
I got sucked in--
it was the atmosphere--
the mood of entire trees
and lit lanterns
inside an apartment.

Your limbs stretched away from me,
straight line of realization.

I wanted to lay my body lengthwise
against yours, and breathe in your
familiarity with the calm
acceptance of one who's learned lately to
smile.

Instead we hugged woodenly,
words heavy inside me like
the pizza you bought, the one
I didn't thank you for.

FRIENDS

They stood on the porch
as people do in the ancient East
and watched while the leaves
along the gravel road
gathered me up like a sigh.
The red and yellow-orange of my parking lights
flicked in slow rectangles.

When I reached the main road
I turned on my full beams,
the long white cylinders
stroking the blurred fur
of midnight.
For a moment, I wanted to turn
back, to feel again that security
of being accepted
in the warm glow over fish and salad,
the cool sweat of the wine glasses.

But I was afraid to say
I love you,
afraid of what to say next,
afraid of being alone.

AFFAIR

Looking out at you through
a glaze of new knowledge
I realize:
This is not what I want.

Your woman came to us
in the charge of deep night
and held my hand.
"It's okay," she said.
"I don't mind."

So I took you on Tuesdays and Saturdays
while she sold paint in a
decorating center.

Now I think of her white gown and selflessness
and I recoil.

So no more hurrying home to love you
in the middle of the afternoon
my bicycle jumping curbs out of habit
thudding on the other side
like pain that wraps around me now and squeezes
estrus
anaconda
until I take hold
until I let go.

POET

for Marilyn Kallet

Lonely child
idea saver
thought connector
word taker
form creator
sentence shaper
order seer
pattern maker

secret weaver
poem builder.

HAIKU

dawn--

cat's pink tongue curls
into a yawn

jack in the pulpit. . .
your hand closes
over mine

late October sky--
an overripe persimmon
rustles the leaves

at Auschwitz
those still skeletons
these winter trees

this winter moon--
the rippled scallops
bloom on shore

RAILROAD BILL

bill the
cat pulls at
sleep with sharp
claws and
purrs

while I
stroke the soft
fur under his
chin and
watch

voyeur of whisker
twitch and fish
dreams

WORDS FOR THE STRANGE MAN WHO
CALLS CATS "EVIL"

He hands me the lost purple bandanna
and spits words at me:
"Glad I could do something for you."
I hang my head like a child who's been caught
nursing ingratitude, as if I cannot appreciate
this gesture enough.

He goes on:

"Kerchief, bandanna, they're not the same,
you know."
Of course I know. I want to tell him so.
I want to tell him about myself
so he'll respect me.
I want to explain
or brag. . . .
The words stick to the back of my
throat like tiny
hands.

"Make a pronouncement about this poem,"
he asks me later.
I laugh and let the sharp
edges go by,
flicking against my skin like
shurikens.
Mere flesh wounds.
They heal.

HAIKU MOMENT

It was gone in an instant.

My lips still feel the loss,
wanting as they did
to press against yours,
 against the blue of your eyes
 against the black of your mind.

I looked at you sideways
and wondered about love,
about proper etiquette,

and I gave in

to the fear of change
the fear of inadequacy
 when reality does not finish
 what imagination has begun.

LIGHT

She looks more vulnerable with her hair pulled back.
He sees it in her eyes, larger somehow, farther
apart.

She creeps from rock to grey rock;
each worn smooth by the stroke of clear water.
It's this beauty she knows best,
the quiet blue of sky,
the deep evergreen.

He knows only her yearning,
her desire to match the elements,
her ache to be reabsorbed.

Later, he knows, she will speak of
plans and responsibilities
as if they were malignant,
staring out at him through her
marijuana cocoon, or a hangover, or a new
yoga position.

He'll buy her coffee and cigarettes.
He'll listen while she chants
old Indian rhythms
by candlelight.

He thinks he loves her.

WOMAN

What power, to enter her
to feel her close on and around you
like your own slick palm when you were
younger.

When you're away
she caresses herself
and pretends it is you.

She sees you when she's lonely
or cold, holding you at the center
of her being, finding a balance there,
a momentary stasis.

She lets you go in the morning
her gaze already turned inward
flashing against the darkening fiber
of her soul.

MOLTING

To stave off boredom we
entertain night with bright
farce and hot
passion.

It does not last.

And when morning blinks
in its stiff confusion
we smile
exchanging faces
we don't even know.

HIGH-STICKING

When I remember hockey
I think of Greg's tall blonde body
rushing past me with the high whine
of metal on ice, and I hear again
the harsh blaring of the buzzer.

"A lively sport," Greg's ex-lover once said,
standing beside me on her long legs and soft
boots, her breath suspended in front of her.

I hated her for that.
I hated her carefully made-up face
and her fake fur,
the way she seemed to follow us around,
as if she missed Greg, even after she had
hurt him.
I told myself I'd never do that:
hurt him, give him up, cheat on him.

When I did, I told myself I wasn't like
her, that I hadn't hurt him as badly, that it was
a mutual agreement.

How simple it would have been then
to love him, to love
her, to love myself.

How simple it should be
to love this man who's with me now,
to let love be stronger
than fear or pain.

The buzzer goes off in my memory,
warning me that the last period is
ending, warning me that the game is nearly
over.

CRY

A grown woman lies
on the floor of a half-bath
and cries.

He knows.

He can do nothing for her.

He sighs and turns
back to his
books, his old
pains, away
from the dead part of her
eyes when she
turns to him.

Always too soon, he thinks.
Always something to prove.

She moves along inside her
own fears, draws the
curtains,
stares.

She'll beg him to
let her
stay.

He hopes he'll be
able to say
no.

HEMISPHERES

My mind's not
sharp--it's
soft and curved at the
edges so I won't
hurt myself and
my body
has its own
memories.

DOORWAYS

(1)

Crouched inside the intellectual tradition
we circled and circled
nostrils flared
searching the space between us
for a mutual insight,
that moment of epiphany.

My thoughts slid out like birth while yours
squeezed shut.

You were lost to me.

(Would it make any difference at all
if I said I love you?)

(2)

In ballet yesterday
reverence, the final movement,
was the only thing that was not
lost to me.

Afterwards I clenched my back
strode from the room.

I always said when I break down it will be
in private.

(Would it make any difference at all
if I said
I love you?)

(3)

"If I didn't have a body," she said,
"I'd be in a constant state of flux."

She grew weary, however,
of crouching between the man's knees
day after day
his thighs dark and heavy
like a bear's.

DOORWAYS [cont.]

She couldn't tell him the way her neurons fired
in complete sentences
bouncing words off images like
blood against white porcelain and bone
or, soaked into the knees of her blue denims.

"I never thought about suicide,"
he might have said.

(Would it make any difference
at all
if I said I love you?)

(4)

When he walked
he walked straight and easy.
When he walked away
he never looked back.

(Would it make
any difference at all
if I
said
I love you?)

VITA

Sheri D. Walker was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, in November, 1960. Her family moved around quite a bit during her first eight years--she lived in Chattanooga, Tennessee; in Shawmut and Lanette, Alabama; and in Defuniak Springs, Florida. After the death of her father, the family settled once again in East Tennessee. Sheri received her B.A. in English from The University of Tennessee in August, 1982. In 1984 she moved to Tempe, Arizona, to study at the graduate level. After a year, she returned to Knoxville to complete her M.A. in English at The University of Tennessee in June, 1988. She is currently working on the M.S. degree in Dance at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Besides writing and dance, her interests include guitar, piano, and art.