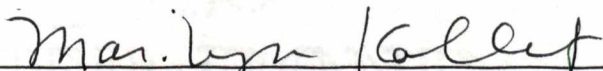


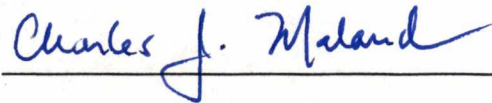
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Marilyn Kallet, Major Professor

We have read this thesis  
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Date May 17, 1991

**WAKING TO OTHER LIVES**

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Linda L. Parsons

August 1991

## DEDICATION

For Jeff Daniel Marion,

river man, river man.

Your boundless heart, your dignity,

and your belief in the human spirit

have led me to love and explore

the rural parts of myself.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I gratefully acknowledge Professors Marilyn Kallet, Michael Keene, and Charles Maland, who served as my committee members, with special thanks to Dr. Kallet, my committee director. I've heard that the finest teachers act as catalysts through which the best learning and insights flow to their students. With their honesty, encouragement, and nurturing, Dr. Keene and Dr. Kallet have been such catalysts for me.

I also thank my friends, whose strength, humor, and empathy keep me sane and very much among the living.

The following poems in this collection have appeared in other publications: "Confessions of a Courteous Southern Woman: Saying the Magic Words," *Kalliope*; "Often Before Evening," *Appalachian Heritage*; "Sadness," *Georgia Review*; "Understanding," *The Tennessee Poet* (Library Benevolent Association); "In the Old Way," *Louisiana Literature*; "The House Grants Favor," *Apalachee Quarterly*; "Good Friday: Knowing When to Be Saved," *Birmingham Poetry Review*; "Losing a Breast: Prayer Before Surgery," *Iowa Review*; "Feste's Song," *Negative Capability*; "Champagne Hour," "Remembering the Dream," "Not a Suicide Poem," "Angel of Strays," and "River Man, River Man," *Phoenix Literary Art Magazine*.

## ABSTRACT

This collection consists of forty-three poems that have been written over a ten-year period. The first section of the manuscript includes poems drawn from childhood memories and family stories, and moves to a more mature speaker who is assessing her place among both pleasant and unpleasant memories. The poems of the second section continue to trace this self-assessment as the speaker measures what is both present and missing in her life. The third section is largely set in the speaker's house, with family voices and expectations all around her. The fourth section is one of loss and separateness from the traditional family, but with the hope of rebirth into a different life. The speaker of the last section has a fully adult voice: she faces a new life with a new love, although her losses are very real, very deep. The pursuit of happiness that is so prevalent in the previous sections is now tempered with the realization that as our lives move forward, we also must leave others behind.

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## INTRODUCTION

This collection represents a journey through childhood stories and memories, through a difficult marriage, finally to love, and into the realities and mixed blessings of independence. Because the speaker is taking this life-journey through the poems, I have arranged them largely in chronological order, with the more recent work later in the collection.

The first section, "Fables on Life," contains poems drawn from childhood. In many of these poems, the language is childlike and innocent. In others of this section, the adult speaker realistically weighs and assesses the memories of childhood to see where they have brought her.

In the second section, "The Road Home," the speaker turns from childhood and its memories to look at the here-and-now. Her voice is more mature in these poems and filled with longing, sadness, and restlessness. The language is more lyrical than in the previous section, and when I wrote these poems, I attempted more rhyme, traditional forms, and conceits than I currently use. I believe that during these years, I needed more order and traditional discipline in my work as a means of ordering the emotional frustrations in my life. Thus the poetry of this time channeled and ordered my feelings into a productive form

that enabled me to carry on with life as it was. Through this work I was learning, as Rilke said, to live the questions now, to know that having the answers now would be more than I could bear, and to know that my future was somewhere in my heart and would appear in its own time-- although at the time these were hard, bittersweet lessons.

In creative writing classes and in reading other modern poets, I was also learning to edit my work, to learn the power of irony, of understatement, of paradox, and of less sometimes being better. I also learned that when I read poetry, I want to be moved and affected, to be changed in some way by the particular poet's vision and depth of emotion. I want to feel, in Emily Dickinson's words, that the top of my head has been taken off. Just as I want to feel this when reading others' work, I want my work to elicit a similarly deep emotional response in listeners or readers.

The third section, "The House Grants Favor," contains poems set mainly in the speaker's house. Here she comments on her marriage, her children, her friends, the house itself, and reveals what these people and things both give to and take from her. This section includes several dream poems, and in the last poem, she dreams of leaving the house, of leaving a sickness of sorts, and realizing that she can heal herself.

In the fourth section, "Waking to Other Lives," the speaker is in the early stages of independence. This section represents a fruition of

the speaker's earlier struggles to change her life, to feel loved and respected, to regain an inner strength, and to find peace of mind. However, these things do not come without great cost. The questions, now, that the speaker must live are: What price? Can it be endured? And aren't things hard-fought often the most precious?

"Swansong," the last section, feels completely like a song to me. Now the speaker is trying her wings, suddenly feels beautiful, has found her mate, and is at last within sight of the home she has so long sought and believed would appear. The questions that she once forced herself to live in are now beginning to feel like answers.

As I sifted through the poems to include in this collection, I was struck by the images of dryness and drought in the sections "The Road Home" and "The House Grants Favor." I wrote these poems during several summers of terrible drought. I recall strongly identifying with this outer weather, and poem after poem expressed a similar inner dryness. However, a change occurs in the last two sections. The earlier fever has broken, and water images and stories of rebirth abound. The speaker literally feels led to water and the end of drought, awakening as much to rain on her face as to a long-awaited kiss.

In addition to these images of drought, I was also struck by the level of anger and sadness in the middle sections. However, I noted that whether by conscious design or unconscious need to reassure both myself

and my readers, even the poems of greatest anger and yearning contain some degree of enduring comfort, reconciliation, healing light, or hope. Ultimately, our belief in the strength of the human spirit enables us to thrive and endure, and to keep hope alive, despite our many losses. Over the years, my poems have represented my struggle to believe this and to infuse the darkness behind or ahead of me with enough comfort and light to last the longest night.

## **I. FABLES ON LIFE**

## THE POEM

Are you my artesian waters,  
my sunken watering places.  
Are you the witching stick  
and cracked ravine you lead to.  
Are you a woman's tolerance,  
her conception and foaling of grown men.  
Are you a man's washing, his fear of blood,  
the mother whose suicide  
I knew of long before now.  
Are you the father moving  
far offshore, even as I say  
*Here am I, here I am.*  
Are you the letter burning my hand,  
the prayer refused at bed.  
Are you a room whose blinds  
converge light along the wall.  
At the table children cry: *Look!*  
*The room jumps with rainbows!*  
*May we eat with them, are they kind,*  
*like flocking birds and snow?*  
Are you the child  
torn between parents,  
and homesickness  
hammered through the child.  
Are you impossibilities,  
people sworn never to touch.  
Tell me, are you rod and staff.  
Do you soothe or miscarry.  
On the day set for naming,  
will you claim at heavy breasts,  
smash, or drown.

**BEFORE**

One had to last  
a whole school day.  
A flannel rag  
was all we had.  
A piece torn off  
Daddy's old shirts  
was all we ever had.

Winters the road  
heaved bowels of mud and ice.  
We walked ahead of boys  
before the damp  
could show through  
our leggings.

Nights we washed out  
the rouge red  
and pinned on  
a fresh cloth  
rinsed clean  
the night before.

Mama would say  
wasn't it fine  
the Lord  
had raised up  
a girl  
in one hand  
and set down  
a woman  
in the other.

## CHAMPAGNE HOUR

Lawrence Welk strikes up  
his twenty pieces.  
Around the chair's left side,  
Harley opens his fifth Black Label  
since supper. His wife never counts  
on Saturday night, and he can slip  
a few empties behind the chair.  
It's Cole Porter, the number  
they won First  
doing the Lindy Hop  
at the VA benefit in '44.

The bubble machine  
takes him back.  
Sometimes he talks  
better days  
to his granddaughter.  
The Pelican Line:  
table damask  
Crab Louis on Spode  
grasshopper pie  
movement so smooth,  
you pulled into Bristol  
all the way from Atlanta  
in the space of a dog's pant.

She knows the caboose  
is brick red  
and follows piggybacks  
on the tail end.  
What she loves most  
in this house,  
is the bathtub,  
crouching on clawed feet  
like a female Congo cat.  
Through suds and plastic cups  
her toes shoot budlike  
from the water.

**CHAMPAGNE HOUR (continued)**

She calls to be dried.  
Myron Floren  
has finished on the accordion.  
Her grandmother  
leaves before the old women  
polka together on camera.  
Past the bathroom door  
her arms clink  
with three, maybe four, bottles.

## GLITTER BOX

Look at me glitter.  
I am the crown Queen of England.  
My earrings are little dewdrops.  
They hang free and do a dance  
when my head moves. Count my  
pretty pins. I have a rooster  
with red rubies across its tail.  
A Christmas tree and Siamese cat  
on my collar, daylilies on my pocket.  
I pop together maybe fifty beads  
for my necklace. Pop-beads,  
pink, ice blue. I tie them  
in a knot and twirl it  
at myself in the mirror.

Granddaddy sits in his chair  
next to the gas heater.  
*You're liable to break them things.*  
He brings his bottle from the other  
side where he thinks I don't see.

*There's fine pieces in that box.*  
*Good pieces, hear.*

Grandmama comes for her teeth  
soaking on the dresser.  
She opens the pressed powder  
and sprays *Emeraude* twice  
behind my ears.

*Fix yourself up, she says.*  
*We'll catch the bus*  
*and go downtown.*

I take rouge from the drawer.  
Granddaddy hides his bottle  
behind the chair.

**GLITTER BOX (continued)**

*Them things is cheap. Go on,  
hear, break every one.*

The heater throws ragged flame  
animals against the wall.  
I snap beads off my neck.  
Earring dance, tuneless, apart.

## CALL HIM DADDY

They'd rode the express Greyhound  
 from Nashville to Waco.  
 They'd rode like they was younguns  
 riding over to the Wilson County fair  
 near Aunt June's country place.  
 In their billfolds they carry  
 fresh pictures of their children.

*Where is it Mama said  
 we favor him the most?  
 Bailey says to his sister.*

*Always claimed it was  
 around the eyes, says Marie.  
 But I say it's his whole shape.  
 He kindly stoops around the shoulders.  
 We kindly stoop too.*

Bailey rears back  
 against the stiff seat.  
*Daddy used to let me  
 light up his Camels.  
 Never would let you girls.  
 I'd get him a high yella flame  
 and he'd say, They's no flies on you.  
 nossiree.*

*Get a match ready to remind him  
 it's you, Marie says.  
 Been twenty years if it's a day.  
 Bailey checks his pants pocket  
 for the polaroids of his children.  
 They're right on top,  
 next to the matchbook.*

Uncle Jimmy's directions take them  
 to a shoe repair shop.  
*This is his place, I reckon,  
 says Marie. Look at them striped awnings.  
 Daddy put striped awnings on every window at home.  
 They would flop in the rain  
 like they was wet tree frogs.*

**CALL HIM DADDY (continued)**

*Take off your shoes, Bailey says  
to Marie. Ask for something done.  
The stooped man behind the counter  
looks them over.*

*Put taps on, pleasessir.  
I want to sound pretty when I walk.  
Marie stands in her stockingfeet.*

*Tell him, Bailey whispers.  
Call him Daddy to his face.*

*These'll take mebbe an hour, lady.  
I'm backed up right smart.  
Fill out this here claim ticket.*

*Name's Marie. She waits.  
I'm your oldest girl.  
He's your boy Bailey Lee.*

*You all went and growed up, he says.  
Yessiree, all growed up.*

*We got children, Daddy.  
Between me and Bailey Lee,  
you got five grandbabies.*

*I got pictures of my boys, Daddy.  
They favor you most around the eyes.*

*Mama died two years ago, says Marie.  
The sugar diabetes blacked up her feet.  
She always knew you were somewhere.*

*I need more three-inch brads  
for these thick heels of yours, he says.  
I got more out yonder in the storeroom.  
Don't go away, hear.*

CONFESSIONS OF A COURTEOUS SOUTHERN WOMAN:  
SAYING THE MAGIC WORDS

Passion is one thing.  
But, my raising.  
Free Will Baptists.  
Women never sitting at meals.  
Clean underwear in case  
of a car wreck, Mama said,  
where perfect strangers  
could see your drawers.

Bad Eddie Carlyle  
with me in the coat closet.  
Say, Hell.  
I said hell.  
Say, Damn.  
I said damn.  
Say worse.  
I said worse.

Older boys urge girls from windows.  
*Come out, red rover, come out.*  
*Let's get us to the Stardust Drive-In.*  
*Let's get us out for a late, long ride.*

Captain, my Captain.  
The Treasure House is far.  
I say please and thank-you,  
being taken like late, long rides.

**OFTEN BEFORE EVENING**

Often before evening  
a weight drops over you.  
Is it, do you think,  
the summer?  
Jarflies unburrow, and whine.  
Late in their games,  
children jump hot pepper.

*Many sons had father Abraham.  
Father Abraham had many sons.  
I am one, and so are you.*

*We have flying hair!  
We win at hot pepper!  
We please our fathers,  
being sons!*

Often before evening  
a new door appears beside the old.  
Is it, do you think,  
a trick of dusk?  
Boxwoods seem whitewashed.  
Wings drop like small weights,  
or children's far-off singing.

## II. THE ROAD HOME

## PREPARE THE FALL

Expect the symptoms of fall.  
We too know the descent.  
Uneaten berries wither and winter.  
Dogwoods ignite.  
Days contract intuitively.  
Wasps bore the eaves.  
Weevils breed in cabinets.  
Common ills, and seasonal.  
We also cry when men  
pare through pumpkins,  
the ganglion scrapped  
on old newspaper.

Prepare, now.  
Remove crazed Lenox from shelves.  
Have the female spayed.  
Stop waiting for everything  
to be yours.  
Notice how coolness  
garners the throat of things.  
How hot tea stings down  
in your breasts, like the baby  
you almost want there again.  
How jars populate the cellar.  
How dusk is like abalone  
switching on.

## THE ROAD HOME

Consider a road.  
A blind curve.  
Night, perhaps.  
Timing compels you  
along the ultimate gravity:

*What if people in those houses were dead?  
What if a train passed over, rails giving way?  
What if you drove on straight at the curve?*

Dim highwaymen  
flag you to the gravel  
shining on either rough side:

*What if women lift children from traffic?  
What if all tunnels meet?  
What if pavements merge in one embraceable light?*

**SADNESS**

You are an oval object at my throat.  
Your picture changes  
from one who will leave  
to another who will be left.

You join private talk  
like a third person, or the humidity.  
You stay until we say, *This is killing us!*

You are windows at a certain time of day  
looking out over a certain patch of yard.  
Never again can I see quince  
without seeing how a woman goes on,  
a man goes on, how the world stops.

You are all the children flying off,  
wanting sugar in their rice, asking  
absurd presents. Fathers, for example.

You are a house boarded up  
with craziness inside.  
Somebody still rants  
about Shiloh, about Vicksburg:

*We are occupied!*  
*A defeated people!*  
*We are forced to live!*

You descend from the gods.  
A cloak of mist guarding,  
smothering, saying,  
*Imagine happiness.*

## UNDERSTANDING

Understanding, your foreign tongue  
draws me from banishment.  
Though winds turn scarce to evenly steer,  
I speak no language here.

*Whole worlds join in my consent.  
What end do you long for, and fear?*

That I last until dawn,  
out roaming alone, should happiness  
be summoned, or appear.

**SONNET FOR THE OPTIMIST**

Faces do not glow in my poems.  
Only the alabaster lamp relieves gloom.  
I am uninspired by blunt hands of men.  
Old chaos, where then is comfort?  
I call my children, *Dear fawn, sweet colt!*  
They say, running, *See your Absalom!*  
I warn impatiens, *Frost! Do you wish now to die?*  
Saved, they befriend the warmth inside.  
Glowing faces, blunt hands, come inhabit my home.  
At brow, at breast, knowing, being known.  
Be a world sought, rarely found in time.  
Be talk over tables, charged nerves at my spine.  
Words, perhaps days, tender enough for your name  
moving seamlessly toward life, no longer away.

**DEAR DR. DONNE: ON DROUGHT**

Skies give no rain to this burgeoning field.  
Drought splinters rows less than woman revealed.  
Swollen, though shrinking, I drink from no source.  
Witch me away, apart from this course!  
Passion sorrows earth under fierce, bloated skies.  
Passion cools upon men struck blind.

Come, great flood! Bring me to a second fruit!  
Awaken seeds, soil, and constant branching root.

## OUT OF SINGING

In dreams, they say,  
though mired in terrible end,  
we can change it to good,  
even set stones to singing.  
Outside, a summer storm.  
I dream of drought,  
women gather at wells.

*Wind sucks the shade  
against the screen  
and slings it back out.  
Hail shatters windshields.  
A boy crossing the street  
guards his face.  
From my window I see  
his forehead split.  
Like Stephen, he does not  
leave the circle,  
but lets down his hands.*

At the well  
I cannot see the circle  
turn friendly,  
nor stones  
set to singing.  
Their hands hold nothing  
round or flat,  
gray or cool.

## CHILD WEAVING ON A HOOP

*Is the middle always like this?  
the child asks, weaving.*

Like all creatures at the middle,  
we keep forgetting we are loved.  
Despite good light, warp thickens  
and clouds the way.  
There God says, Seek in night, rest in day!  
There Rilke says, Live the questions now!  
There time says, I dim the eye of your rage!  
There love says, We will keep the smallest,  
the one with the backturned paw.  
There life says, I am always like this,  
by chance in your hands.

### **III. THE HOUSE GRANTS FAVOR**

## HOUSE

Should be more  
 than my grandmother's quilt  
 her mother pieced from shirts.  
 More than putting on lights,  
 putting knives in drawers.  
 More than even children  
 upstairs at their teatimes.  
 More than bones of cats and a dog,  
 by now dissolved to peat,  
 turning phlox bluer, coreopsis taller,  
 four o'clocks precise.  
 More than a sideboard  
 overlaid with curling husks--  
 sign of some family's fullness.  
 More than sugar spilled in the cabinet  
 sweetening the wood underneath forever.

## II.

A man and woman  
 are a symbol of something.  
 In our room,  
 plastered cracks  
 sever the walls.  
 Their white finds us.  
 We turn from it, like green apples  
 placed apart on a dish.

A child's room is no symbol.  
 A basket of shells makes it a lee shore.  
 Hats on the wallpaper make it a shop window.  
 Tigers and teddies make it wild.  
 The comforter makes it good dreams.  
 Raisins make it cultivation  
 of the earth's budding shoulders.

## REMEMBERING THE DREAM

Not remembering your dreams  
is a sign of something.  
For months I have curled tight  
as a stillborn in my sleep.  
In a Cheever story, the wife  
says, *The children are sick!*  
*I haven't worn any shoes for two weeks!*  
*In college I delivered a paper in Paris!*  
*Don't you understand why I'm crying?*  
No, her husband says.  
*I don't.*

Some men hold their paycheck  
over your head like a sword.  
*This is my bed*, they say.  
*I paid for it.*  
Last year I made some money.  
I bought a hundred-year-old sideboard,  
alabaster lamp, walnut table and chairs.  
The table is old and English.  
I touch the swirling grain  
as I would a girl's head.

I remember now.  
In the dream, my table is wounded.  
A human wound, unbleeding, laid open.  
It glows down to the bone.  
My table is wounded, I say to my husband.  
Don't you understand?  
No, he says.  
I don't.

**DREAM OF THE WOUNDED TABLE**

Hair and sleek laid-open tissue,  
nothing like wood. But an eye  
*Don't you understand?*  
or what's left of it,  
sucked into the socket.  
Nothing like wood, not mossy,  
no snapping dry cries. But skin  
*Don't you understand?*  
unbloodied clear down to bone.  
Believing, as some believe,  
God enters through a wound.

**PERIWINKLE**

To speak of marriage  
is to speak  
of Willy Loman  
or a used car  
or even periwinkle.

It is liked  
but not well-liked.  
It is adjusted  
but knocks  
at interstate speeds.  
It is ground cover  
parted at shrinking light.

**THIS YEAR**

The candles go unlit this year.  
Above their heat, angels trumpet  
round and round. No one says,  
*But the angels are standing still.*  
I take down the tree  
four days after Christmas.  
No one says, *Wait, stop.*  
I look over the yard  
laying low for spring.  
No stalk or berry says,  
*We have always been yours.*  
I throw out dried buds  
slumping in the vase.  
I used to love  
their look of lips  
refusing a kiss.  
No bud says,  
*Are we past even love?*

I learned pity from my father, I learned silence.

--Gerald Stern  
"Bread Without Sugar"

### IN THE OLD WAY

In the old way of men and women,  
we learn silence from our fathers.  
Going to husbands we believe it cannot last.  
At nineteen I still thought  
this life was my first on earth.  
I made plans, a flagstone walk in front,  
marigolds in the middle bed. I thought  
conversation a sure thing. And you would be  
like the woman at Cascade Plunge,  
my float somehow twisted under  
the pool water, her arms lifting me,  
gasping child, back to the good air of day.

Is this a yard?  
Iris overrun by clover, johnny grass  
in the hothouse. Muscadine so wild  
I let it take the myrtles.  
The flagstone shifts each winter.  
We trip constantly.  
You admire babies in their outfits,  
but we have no friends. What keeps you a hermit--  
that the world, if you saw it, might surprise you?  
I know a woman who says to her husband,  
*Tell me a story*, and he begins, his fingers  
probably making small circles in her hair,  
along her neck, long past *The End*.

## THE HOUSE GRANTS FAVOR

Mock-orange is now for bringing in.  
Barely sweet, petals hang a short while.  
Drop here, drop here, their litter wan as hymnals.

Books in cases are now for breaking stillness  
by a mantel where a clock ticks,  
where a spoon may scrape a pudding bowl,  
where hours pass like women's skirts.

Spring nights are now for closing in  
on people who forget conversations,  
how sassafras tastes in the mountains,  
a tongue in the mouth of a boy,  
and the memory of it.

Children are now for watching,  
for calling to dinner and bath.  
Mothers kiss their sweat, name it  
life as it happens.

Rooms in the house are now for counting  
those who wander on and off the beds,  
who carry laundry upstairs, like bees  
in their blindness. Who lean out the door  
and take the handle as if, in flying,  
they would speak.

(For Rachel)

**A CHILD'S FEET**

Though you are curling here  
on sheets, I once held you as a nipple  
in my mouth. Were you ever that new?  
That slow, before the sack races ran?  
Are you pink still, and smooth-heeled?  
Are you pebbles sipping milky light,  
like Gretel's crumbs, and Gretel, sought  
by wood, by hawk, by changeling night?

(for Elayne)

### NOT A SUICIDE POEM

Boys in art class carve  
geometrics on oil pastel,  
and their bellylike inner arm  
with X-ACTO knives.  
Girls sit in the dark with candles,  
burning the same soft place.  
Some tell of making a cut, milking a drop  
or two, putting out the flames.  
My daughter says, *I would do it with pills,  
just take them all, see black all day.*

How do I tell you I've taken  
the aspirin, codeine, amoxyl,  
and stuffed them inside my socks.  
How do I say *Live long.*  
That the static I kept  
from my grandmother's grave  
stays and stays, so blue  
one minute, so purple the next.  
That I nursed you, the nights went on,  
I forgot how the world looked. I saw  
it differently, as mountains can look,  
sometimes large, sometimes not.

**GOOD FRIDAY: KNOWING WHEN TO BE SAVED**

You come to know the one.  
You notice his smallness, how  
he moves away from the others.  
They still pin down the mother  
to nurse. He stops taking water.  
His pink feet turn gray.  
Knowing what you know  
brings you into the room every hour.  
It's a child, after all, huddled  
against the cage wall.  
You give him milk, place him  
in a sock near the mother.  
Again and again he heads for  
the cold corner.

Who refuses their own rescue?  
Aren't we, moment by moment, seeking  
just this? I have heard we should not rush  
too quickly into Easter morning.  
Only when we have fully despaired  
all night at the dark cave  
do our mothers seem everywhere.

I call my daughter in from playing  
and point out the one.  
I tell her to touch the thin back,  
to breathe warm breath on him.  
Slowly, I say, you have  
all night.

(for Libba)

## LOSING A BREAST: PRAYER BEFORE SURGERY

In another time and place  
 I would show your hand the way  
 under this bloom shimmering  
 like a hunter's moon just below the skyline.  
 Under, because it's heavier than you think.  
 Fibrous bulb, paper-white fountain in your mouth,  
 roots now severed at body and soul.  
 Deep in the last moment there's time to remember  
 the lilacs I broke off to sell on Russell Street.  
 They always ripened in rain.  
 Am I anything like that purple time,  
 those buds down on Russell?  
 Am I lovely today as you take up the knife?

*Valium, howl through me.*  
*Surgeon, bless and keep me.*  
*Lights, burn above me.*  
*Birches, dance round me.*

Here is the pulse of my children.  
 Will you cut it? Will you throw it away  
 like a bag of beans? Not knowing a mother's nights,  
 old as the pounding of her baby's heart  
 in the soft cleft of bone. Its head a globe,  
 my breast a globe, the night bearing down in constant song.  
 We are all so young to empty out our time like this.  
 Warm and sticky, we have grown up together  
 in the long, the beautiful hunger.

## ANGEL OF STRAYS

At almost sixteen, my daughter  
is noticing architecture.  
She returns from a trip to Sewanee  
tasting words like colonnade, turret,  
Corinthian. Taken mostly with

All Saints Episcopal--suits of armor  
in the basement, the kneeling, the murmuring  
congregation, the thought of bleeding palms.  
She is protected now, she says.  
A Sewanee angel goes with anyone who

touches the top of the car while leaving  
the city gates. I want to believe the sky  
is not falling. Why not angels?  
I have one on my mantle,  
serene look of the garden and St. Joan.

Made of terra cotta, she holds a bird  
whose wings mimic hers. Flight astounds us,  
those otherworldly feathers beating down  
at just the right moment. Then we and our children  
land safely in Tennessee, far from hurricane country.

Sometimes she leaves the mantle  
in the shape of mating wrens, of ladybugs,  
drawn to the house of certain strong women.  
She appears as a wounded moth  
night after night on a friend's finger

as she tries to swallow her father's suicide.  
She goes as a Monarch with one torn wing  
to a friend's porch who on that day  
learns she will lose a breast.  
She comes as your dead mother,

bringing others with her to the bedside,  
wingtips touching, heads bowed.  
They gather you up like a stray  
roaming too many years without desire,  
or milk, or a voice to ask for either.

### AFTER THE SICKNESS

The night my fever breaks  
I dream of a large white house  
with many servants. I walk through  
it, and out to the lawn, once  
then again, like the hands of a Jewish  
woman over her Shabbat candles.

Do I walk through twice  
to adore its polished mahoganies?  
To prove I can leave, again and again?  
Going down the staircase, to the foyer, outside,  
I see no servants, but feel myself  
dipped in a basin, drying on the quince  
nearer the bursting yellow fruit  
than the thorns.

#### **IV. WAKING TO OTHER LIVES**

## NIGHT WALK

Dark enough out that I worry,  
I take my evening walk  
in the graveyard. It's the time

of day when objects blur and soften.  
Venus appears clearer  
than my hands, my next step.

I look ahead to the caretaker's house,  
stay on the paved road.  
I tell myself the flashes

over this field of marble  
are headlights from Broadway,  
not the dead stirring up and out:

*McCreary, Harris, Carroll,*  
*our mothers, our beloveds.*  
Dark now, led only by black

cedars marking either side. I cannot  
tell if I've passed the small bear  
left yesterday on a fresh rise of earth,

or if I would notice the palm of Christ  
on my head. Now is your chance to speak,  
I say. Do you cling to this world,

making hell of your heaven?  
Where is the dirt  
from the newly cored ground?

Will those who gather  
miss the sound of its falling?

**NIGHT WALK (continued)****II.**

Our children, our beloveds,  
those who lived, who bloomed  
and fell from their nests,

those we pushed out. I was nineteen  
and afraid, my husband being sent  
a year to Korea. It was legal in D.C.

We drove to a clinic on M Street  
and did what we did.  
The travel orders never came through.

*Lara, Elayne, Rachel.*  
Where do they all go?  
Are there paved roads,

a caretaker's light, cedars  
brushing the tops of their heads,  
the chance they will speak again?

**ALL THAT MATTERS**

Is it day? I'm losing the light.  
Last week while working a puzzle  
I found myself in the rushes, browns  
running together, little to tell me  
where day started. But I felt it coming,  
the sky could have any blue I wanted.  
All I saw was the inside of reed,  
swampy shoulders keeping me afloat,  
the sounds of weeping onshore.  
Sometimes leaving is all that matters,  
but it's hard when pieces are missing.  
The rest of everything rocked me,  
untangled now, carried by women  
sunning their breasts  
at the sides of my basket.

## THE NEW WIFE

My officemate tells me  
he is married two months.  
He tries to understand  
why his wife calls so often.  
She is restless, waiting  
for a job to turn up,  
the apartment immaculate,  
dinner already on the stove.

Twenty years ago I was so new  
all my meals glistened,  
the hope of home alive and well.  
I tended that fire, breathed on it daily.  
I thought my life would be like the sun,  
rising endlessly, feeding the fields,  
coaxing day after day into bloom.

My officemate asks me  
how to roast pumpkin seeds,  
how much salt, what temperature.  
I think back to each October,  
to the new wife  
who slices a pumpkin, their first,  
and lifts out the orange tissue  
with her bare hands.  
On a buttered pan, she bakes  
the seeds crisp and brown.

The clean rooms rise and fall,  
evenly breathing. She takes  
the bowl to her husband,  
their days glistening like the salt  
in the corners of her mouth.

## THE DIFFERENCE

I still have a key.  
I use it only when my daughter's  
music is too loud for the knocker.

I stand just inside the door  
like a guest in the house I made  
a home for thirteen years.

I used to go room to room  
deciding what I would take.  
*That's mine, only  
a few things, the house  
will stay itself.*

The sideboard gone now,  
the English pub table,  
dhurrie rugs, blue and rose,  
gone. Did I do all this?

Give the walls their own  
names, then leave behind  
a portrait without faces?

I used to think what difference  
does a chair make, a lamp?  
I couldn't have known this before.  
I was farther and farther away.

My rings dropped into the sink,  
papers piled up, philodendrons sagged.  
No light got in, no wood shone,  
no roses flocked the hallway,

blue gardens I'd started from seed,  
hoping every winter for spring.

## WAKING TO OTHER LIVES

What every mother knows  
I learned the first night  
home from the hospital.  
A tiny sigh, a whimper, meant  
the baby had stopped breathing.  
I haven't slept soundly since.

Nearly twenty years in bed  
with one man is worth counting,  
whatever it was or wasn't,  
the time spent not touching.

In the apartment, my daughter  
tackles me on the new white iron bed.  
We fall together like girls in shortie  
pajamas, our heads an inch from the wall.  
We're laughing.

Each night I smooth down  
my grandmother's quilt, and learn  
to be one woman in a world  
so grievous I forget I can dream,  
so tender the dream comes back:

a barn, an embalmed body,  
people are shouting.  
We slide the clear casket  
from a dome of hay. Pale red  
liquid covers the boy inside.

We watch him stir. We're laughing.  
The lid opens, sweet juice spills  
onto our feet. I wake, liquid  
cleared from my throat.

I have the white iron bed  
all to myself. My other lives  
stirring, shaken off like hay.

(for John Purifoy)

### JOHN'S MUSIC

Then wash us in sound that could remake the world.  
Play for the space between fathers and daughters,  
for forests burning in Malaysia. For the drowned  
holding on, the saved letting go. For the land

of heart's desire, vanishing, when we reach it.  
Play for people who forget their dreams,  
for indifferent couples, weightless as ions.  
For the moment of conception, for desperate ones

who get on the table and whisk it away.  
Play for people who remember their dreams,  
for sweeter days, if anyone remembers.  
For rain in the garden tomorrow, for acorns nearly  
oaks in Kentucky, the babies nearly dead in Kenya.

For the good in us accepting the prodigals,  
for crickets like bells in the air. Play for men  
in self-loathing who lose all women, for women  
taking happiness finally by the throat.

For mothers and sisters, cancer tearing  
their breasts like lotus from branches.  
Play for wives who must leave or be unrecognizable,  
for children glowing brightly with fever.

And play for the unopened box at the end  
of the night, our bodies beating inside  
like ragged wings over waters  
that bring us to life.

**V. SWANSONG**

Oh, what will I do, what will I say,  
when those white wings touch the shore?

--Mary Oliver  
*House of Light*

### SWANSONG

She's taking off, I think,  
the swan in the picture,  
to fly in the face of all things--  
that pearl breast,  
those guarded black eyes.  
The wind seems with her,  
the trees thick and gold,  
the lake barely broken.

Undersides of wings,  
long pitch of neck  
quicken like the hands  
of a bride on her father's arm.  
She calls to her mate,  
their joy nearly human,  
each night spills out  
over chasms of land.

Feste: Would you have a love-song, or a song of good life?

Sir Toby: A love-song, a love-song.

--William Shakespeare

*Twelfth Night*

### FESTE'S SONG

Were this hand the stuff of youth,  
it would play on and endure,  
no delay and ever sure.

Were this hand an aqua vase,  
you would find the proper place,  
saying, *My favorite, my one.*

Were this hand rice paper,  
it would name strange names.  
If flowers are laid at your door,  
you would say, *Ah peonies, at last May.*

Were this hand a tatted cloth,  
you would open the day to the sun,  
and sit with cups, with bread, with cream.

Were this hand kitestings,  
you would unravel the ether.  
*Good land, I am fallen,  
and like the breaking of hearts,  
better off for it!*

Were this hand a mother's breast,  
you would envy her child, saying,  
*I am droughts and sad stories.  
Read me the tale of sweet, blue milk.*

Were this hand your child,  
you would send it to sleep.  
*Four corners to your bed.  
Four angels to your spread.  
One to guide you, one to pray.  
Two to bear your soul away.*

**FESTE'S SONG (continued)**

Were this hand a woman bleeding,  
you would be hands at her back,  
saying, *The years bleed even me.*

Were this hand a woman asking,  
you would yield like vast, black night  
brooding over seas.

(for JDM)

### RIVER MAN, RIVER MAN

I know of your enduring love--  
Holston waters, covered banks  
twining their long way back to you.  
My lake was the Old Hickory, my inner  
tube a branch rocking by. I knew when  
black things swam beneath me, the mouths  
of water moccasins, the unseen floor, wide open.

*Is there green left in your river,  
mayapples on your banks? Do you wade  
the lee side, counting stones so clearly  
underfoot, minnows coming like pups?*

I could be with you now,  
arranging tea, touching your sleeve.  
I could leave this house, though it pulls  
me under. Some things are mine--the sideboard,  
the mission desk, my daughters' paintings.  
They could be skiff, keel, best wind.

*Is your riverbottom sure, do lilies  
root quickly, damselflies beat and mate?  
If you row out to the middle,  
I will call your name twice.*

## RIVER HOUSE

Perhaps you needed to leave,  
saying *I'll get sandwiches*.  
Perhaps I needed to sit alone  
at your desk, in your chair.  
Out on the water I finally see  
the mallard, his hen. You're still  
everywhere, the wren's nest  
and cobalt blue bottles on the sill,  
your fine hand on notes I might read  
were it lighter out.

The river stirs by,  
bringing up what's possible,  
or not, from the other side.  
I cannot tell if I will always love  
this spot, or if the orange moon  
will follow me home. I can tell you  
how the sound of water makes a woman lose  
all track of time, how people at Niagara,  
I've heard, must hold themselves back,  
something urging them *jump, jump*,  
astonished they are speaking  
out loud.

## OUR STORIES

The way you read your story  
in the magazine, holding it first  
with two hands, letting go,  
taking one of mine.  
When you were younger,  
you doubted that Desdemona  
loved Othello for the stories he told.  
Now you know little else matters.  
Your blind grandmother, sifting.  
My grandmother cutting buttonholes  
at the shirt factory, the blade coming down,  
her quota made for the day.  
Your aunts talking, my aunts talking.  
Jarflies singing right out  
of their skin. The car ferry  
I took to Lebanon, the greyhound to Louisville.  
The heron you bought in England  
carved from a sheep's horn,  
the blue lip of a bottle on your sill.  
Light changes through horn,  
through glass, like stories  
we have told all day.

## KINGFISHERS

Whenever you make the trip,  
I hold you in my thoughts.  
You hover there like the kingfisher  
caught between updrafts  
and prospects below.  
You say your mother's mood  
depends on the weather, just look  
how it threatens rain.  
If I went along, I couldn't ease  
anything. Your father's wheelchair  
would weigh as heavy, his breathing rasp  
as always, your mother still trapped  
in her mood. What I can do  
is hover with you, point out  
the brightest coves, where  
sweet fish live and bite,  
let backwaters carry us  
south, unhurried.

## THROUGH THE STORM

Say how the eagles cried  
in your dream, as if all danger  
had passed, blue mist everywhere,  
how you still knew the way.

Say how your children walked  
out on the Holston the only winter  
in your memory or theirs it was solid  
ice, how you had to let them.

Tell how the pear trees sang  
like sweet hives on your farm,  
before you had to leave, in those darkening days.  
How the light reappears, sweet as before,  
like hives finding voice.

Tell how a woman, lowing in drought,  
comes to your river, drinks until full.  
How soundly she sleeps in blue mist,  
how she still knows the way.

## NEWS FROM HOME

From the third floor I hear  
no herons squawking up and down  
river. Only traffic, on and on.

Send more news of home:  
Are squirrels fussing in the sycamore?  
Has the groundhog returned,

his leg surely better?  
Would you run off the dogs  
to save him again?

I go room to room, learning my new  
parameters: home, a few birches  
in the parking lot, no windows

in the kitchen. No river  
at my right, its quiet shine  
leading me to the families we watch

from your many windows.  
If home is our making,  
ask me, what news of mine?

Is the alabaster lamp by my bed,  
dried cockscomb on the wall.  
Are angels all around me,

straw, terra cotta, holding  
doves or praying. Are you drawn  
to the white rocker, my milk yellowing

the rungs one long night of hunger.  
Have you noticed I'm buying  
more green, these small rooms

increasing, windows appearing,  
hallways spreading open like hands  
that touch under the sycamore,

herons scolding their young  
up and down river.

(for Danny)

### ALL THIS TIME

Will the rain stop tomorrow?  
When will Christmas come?  
I am always waiting,  
all this time til the next paycheck,  
til I see you again at my door.  
Between waking and sleeping,  
in this world or that,  
the rest waits.  
I've waited for fall to pass,  
I've read to my children,  
*Spring! sang the bunny.*  
*Spring! sang the groundhog.*  
Ten years ago? Fifteen?  
Is it ever long enough,  
the leaves bursting out,  
the robins bursting out  
of their eggs?

You say the world is not perfect.  
You read to me like a father  
whose child is wet with fever.  
People in the stories so strong and sad,  
I close my eyes. They are looking  
for home, they are tired of waiting.  
*Home for a bunny, a home of his own.*  
*Where will a bunny find a home?*  
I open my eyes to your voice.  
How good is the world, that it comes  
to my door? Is it as close as Christmas?  
Have maples passed to forsythia,  
from this yellow to that?  
Have I taken all this time?

## VITA

Linda L. Parsons was born in Nashville, Tennessee, on February 5, 1953, but considers herself an East Tennessean. She returned to school for her BA in English as a re-entry student in 1985 and graduated Phi Beta Kappa from The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in 1988. She received additional honors, including the Roddy Upperclass Scholarship, John C. Hodges Better English Scholarship, the Margaret Woodruff Award for Poetry, the Knickerbocker Poetry Prize, and the Bain-Swiggett Poetry Prize, among others.

In 1989 as a graduate student also at UTK, she worked as a Graduate Assistant and a Teaching Associate. In spring 1991, she earned a Master of Arts in English with Writing Emphasis.

The author has been writing poetry and plays seriously for ten years. Her poetry has appeared in over thirty journals and anthologies, including *The Georgia Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *Apalachee Quarterly*, *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Piedmont Literary Review*, *International Poetry Review*, *Helicon Nine*, *Louisiana Literature*, *Mississippi Arts and Letters*, and *Negative Capability*, among others.

Her poetry won in *Negative Capability's* 1988 "Eve of Saint Agnes" Competition and in the Associated Writing Programs' 1990 Intro

Awards, among other awards. In June 1991, her musical *Lambarene* with collaborator John Purifoy will receive a staged reading at Paper Mill Playhouse, the state theatre of New Jersey.

The author has worked as an editor in UTK's Audit and Management Services since June 1990.