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CRUSH AND BLOW

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Crush and Blow

May, 2011

A Creative Thesis

Presented to

The College of Graduate Studies

Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of the Arts

Lydia E. Fleming

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To the College of Graduate Studies:

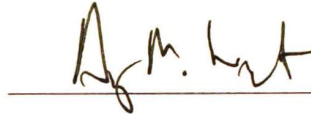
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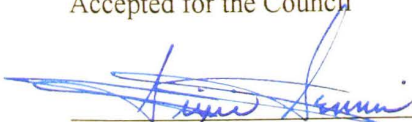


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Cross-stitch

Grandma squinted as she aimed
green thread at the needle and passed
it through, ran her fingers against
the fabric, selected an empty square,
and pushed the needle in.

She pricked her finger
on that first stitch, a slanted line
that would become an x,
that would become a foot,
that would belong to Peter Pan.

She worked slowly, needle
down, pulled through, pulled
up, creating his body rhythmically,
row by row, his arms flung
to the sky, his feet pointed for flight.

Outlining in backstitches, she added
shape and detail: the triangle edges
of a tunic, Peter's fingers splayed
and reaching, eyes focused to the side
where she broke from the pattern;

Instead of dark houses she threaded
pale blue, a dress billowed out
on a rooftop, two fuzzy slippers
gripping shingles; Wendy's head
back, both arms waving.

Blur

At the fair, as a child, she liked
to spin –would run past the stalls
of games with their rings and slender
jars, lights and gaping goldfish,
teddy bears, water-gun
race horses, whack-a-moles and
guess your weight hawkers;
she would push
through the lines for sticky pink
cotton candy, sugar coated
elephant ears, syrupy lemonade,
and corn dogs on a stick;
would ignore the bumper cars’
invitation to crash, the bumper
boats too, painted like sharks
and mermaids in battle;
she would find *The Spider* –
spinning glory of around and up
and down, purple and green
seating, curved metal legs, blinking
lights; would finally choose
a compartment, brace her feet,
and pull the seat belt bar down;
would listen to the motor
start, feel the slow spin begin
and increase, rotate the fair
into lights and sky and ground.

Family Outing

The rollerblades

never felt

tight enough,

the helmet always slipped

forward, bumping

into my glasses,

sweat gathered behind

the nylon of knee pads,

and everyone else

was fast –

pumping toward

the first long drop:

slip, slope, and curve,

past the giant

anthills I'd reach

later, riding on breaks

until the bottom

where my family

would wait, giving me

the chance

to catch up

and whoosh slowly

between them.

Fall Sassafras

My mother took me to the woods
collecting bits of plants for pressing.

We watched for bright pieces, petals
or leaves covered over, walked

on the balls of our feet, crunched
the dull duds into fragments.

Then she stopped and picked up a mitten-
shaped leaf. With thumb and index

finger against its stem, she snapped,
smiled and called me over, held

the stalk to my nose. Underneath
the waxy surface was a smell like sugar.

Rainforest Tour in St. Lucia

The bus crowds with young couples
holding hands, nodding to others
as they sit, sunburned legs stuck
to the seats, wedding rings sparkling.

They are jerked forward, torsos
tilting, when the driver pushes
his boot against the gas pedal;
tires squeal, the resort fades behind.

Some take deep breaths when
the bus sways, increases speed
in the curve of right angles, makes
their stomachs roll and slosh.

Through windows the rainforest
flashes by, and the tour guide points
out a eucalyptus tree, rainbow colors
draped down it like a cloak.

*When cut down this tree is useful
as pulp*, she announces, stopping the bus
for pictures beside the shifting colors
of bark, darkened with time and exposure.

When the bus restarts, her voice changes
cadence- *bamboo grows seven inches
a day* - One couple lustily begins
a song about the benefits of big bamboo.

Aunt Barbara

I saw you during holidays, taking pictures
for Easter in the rain,
childhood me in a red coat and umbrella,
and on Christmas Eve you brought presents
from New York,
huge stuffed animals and dolls tied with bows.
I remember
your hair, dark above shoulder waves, and the way
you asked me to sit,
telling my mother you wanted
a girl just like me.
You did have that girl, much past your prime,
a beautiful girl at art galleries in formal dress,
sifting between the knees
of your husband's peers and poshly clothed critics.
But then you stopped coming to Michigan,
became email updates and the word cancer
across a white screen.
In college the last news came, a date and a question –
your funeral.
At the pool, that night, I swam laps,
each stroke repeating the name of your daughter:
Jeanette, Jeanette, Jeanette

This begins with clipping.

Fingernails and smooth
glass gems of polish
belong to the before –
the days when
you wondered
about the stretch
of a rubber band
and its pitch
without knowing
a grain of oak
or wanting strings
at your fingertips.

Learning forces
this substitution:
flourish for function
and algebra –
frets are numbers
and strings are letters
isolated by steps
mathematically,
some combination
of which
will turn sound
into music.

It's all theory
and study, the rote
repetition of scales –
fingers reaching across
strings, pinching
some and curving
over others
to produce patterns
in a rhythm,
of increasing speed;
melody made
methodically boring.

Those fingers
grow memory
and become stretch
with the practice –
sliding along the neck

of the instrument,
faster and smoother,
while you tire
of isolated chords
and the rise
and fall
of premeditated scales.

Still you'll continue
the formula,
working
your fingerings
past the point,
the dot, the period,
the black hole
in memory when,
like *jealously* or *pickle*,
repetition
makes the sounds
less familiar

and your ear
is no longer
responsible
for the notes –
your calluses
take over,
changing the steps
in the scales
skipping a beat,
a note,
or two,
on purpose

to dance across
the strings,
to vibrate
the very air,
reclaim beauty,
and mischief
and flare
in something
that toil has made
mastery and discipline
has ultimately
unleashed.

The White Buses

The grass lot was hemmed in
by squat buildings – windowless hallways
and offices, rows of cubicles, wooden
desks, men-only bathrooms that smelled
like piss and sweat. The lot itself, almost
a courtyard, empty of decoration,
was full of people avoiding eye contact:
children running past in groups
blurring freckles, lashes, and the shapes
of their ears, parents standing perfectly still,
some leaning against each other,
others casual with one arm around a waist.
Their eyes, all eyes, stared either at the grass
crumpled underfoot, at hands folded
together, skin meeting skin, or at the pattern
of cameo and shadow on another soldier's back.

I waited with the rest, choosing to stare
at my shoes, open-toed heels that sank
holes in the ground, my husband's fingers
smooth on the back of my hand
as the men gathered for roll call, one by one
shouting *here!* and then wandering.
I sat on the grass studying the hair
on his arm and the skin underneath.

Behind us came the buses, too loud
to ignore. They were white and large
and inching forward.

Inside

No one asked the Matryoshka infant if she wanted to be nested inside her sisters, all carved from the same piece of wood to be opened, revealed, displayed in a row with small spaces in between, descending in a perfect diagonal before being reburied in their painted babushkas. She didn't wear a babushka, she had no hair, no rounded red skirt, no pimples or freckles, and nothing to hold in her hands like the oldest sister, clutching a rooster. She was too little for details, her carver would say, and her painter would nod in agreement, plotting down two round dots as eyes and nothing for a nose. If asked, she would have said something about the way inside feels, the layers of wood – a weight, the view – a darkness, her own voice echoing back

In a Screen, In a Box, There's a World

Already I've missed his day in the busyness of mine when I toss my purse against the wall, drop my coat on the floor, and turn the computer on. It pulls up slow while I tidy the places in the room he might see, moving piles of clothes off screen. I turn on instant messenger, click his name with two taps, activate the video camera, call our dog to my lap.

The sun has set on his side of the world, eight hours ahead of mine, and his room is dark through the window on my screen. I squint to distinguish his shape, knowing he should be asleep, wondering if he is.

A flashlight glows and he comes into focus, black t-shirt, gray sweatpants, face shadowed. He looks tired; I'm guilty. *I tried to be home sooner. Sorry.*
"Don't worry, it's fine. How are you?"

The clock in the right hand corner of my screen marks our conversation in seconds and minutes and hours while I ignore his yawns. When he has to sleep he leaves the camera on, lies down facing it, lets me watch his eyelid sink to rest.

I locate myself in my own room, sitting cross-legged, pressed against a brown comforter, with a sleeping dog on my lap and a sleeping husband on the computer, but I am actually across the ocean, buried in a desert. When the signal drops, I disappear.

Sunrise Over Lake Barkley

I missed the turn because of dark and fog,
and night just before sunrise, driving on
past trees, stop signs, and Citcos that glowed
with their rows and rows of lights.

I sped back the way I came, finding the Trace
and curving along it, headlights on the bark
of the forest, tires spraying up rock and dust,
fog thickening slowly. The lake appeared
shrouded on the right, still dark, the sun rising,
but lower than the trees, and I worked quickly,
un-strapping, lifting, and placing my kayak
on the water: a lake of mist I slipped my paddle
into, quiet now, while hidden shapes moved
on the banks. I lowered a hand to touch
and waited for the morning.

Time

The leaf fell just as Steven snapped
his camera lens with a click, a small light
from his flash reflecting off the river
and touching the grass, the trees, the squirrel
three feet away.

He caught that red maple leaf, froze it
there, edges curling up, circles fading
out from its center, and he called it well done,
packed his equipment by placing lens, camera,
flash, and filter in separate sectioned compartments.
At home he would push a button and release
the plastic memory card from his camera,
slide it into his computer, open Lightroom to
edit, tweak white balance, saturation, and tint –
make the colors really pop.

But the leaf spins downstream, now under water,
now above. It lands, a shapely print on a bank
littered with small, polished stones.

I want to be a

skip ing stone

pressed

between two

fingers

coiled

back

and

flung –

wh i p-l i k e

to split

air with speed,

race a blue jay's wing

and pass

distance

like a

sign

on a road

before settling into

rc

a h

and s-k-i-m

and s

i

n

k

During Deployment a Civilian Spouse is Not Supposed to Say

Don't leave. The house is too quiet.
Again. I miss you. I don't sleep,
anymore.

I caught the swine flu
and the news says I'm dying. Come
home.

The lawn mower broke,
but the neighbor already fixed it. He cooked
dinner for me too: spicy, delicious meat –
just teasing.

I bought a thong yesterday, visited
a porn store too. My vibrator's
batteries are dead.

I understand Tom's wife
cheating; You don't want me
enough to stay. I'm lonely.

The cats killed three mice and left
them to bleed. I thought about you
bleeding too.

Reenlisting is unpatriotic.

I'm Redeploying as Soon as I Get Back

She drops
until her legs are tight against
the red porch floor,
her feet beginning to tingle.

She holds
a white bar framing the porch and
looks to a tree
with leaves falling off

She watches
one leaf hang and then
drop to the road,
crushed under balding wheels

A smell
from inside the house
causes her to leap and
stumble to the kitchen,

where eggs
left to boil too long
explode, leave shell-shaped
burn marks against her skin

She shrieks
and a purple phone collides
with a tile floor, the voice
on the other side asking
Are you ok?

That Night He Came In

A living room with an old piano,
brown sofa, crochet afghans –

a dining room with a commodore sixty-four,
wires, cords, display case for handed down china –

kitchen and gas burner stove, pile
of newspapers, hallway, two bedrooms:

peach walls and carpet, carved
bookshelf with hearts, fairytales, science fiction

bunk beds, holes poked, fingers pushed
into mattress and ripping –

master bedroom upstairs, a woman wakes
next to nothing, midnight –

down two levels, in the basement, crunch
shatter – glass breaking; a boot gropes,

and the bathroom's upstairs with patterned tiles,
silver faucet, cream sink, wooden door and a lock.

Leda

A bird cries in the distance,
his voice closer as he calls

me, but I am not waiting, not
writhing in ecstasy, not

ready for his music. I see
the splitting of my thighs

as precious, know the knowledge
I'd gain is cheap, and I walk

through the cold night holding
my coat against me, my feet

sharp staccatos on the sidewalk
coming quicker when I feel him

behind, a heavy shape smelling
of cheap cigars and too much

drink. It makes him strong and fast,
a darkness at my back and then

my front and ripping –
there's no beauty here, the stars

have drowned in the light
of a Home Depot lot

and half empty beer bottles
drip over a stain I can't forget.

Spontaneous: to Grow Unplanned

the grass
or the trees,
a cactus, wildflower,
seed falling
from the beak
of a robin
who ate too fast,
a burr loosened
from the fur
of a bear, a squirrel's
lost stash,
coconut floating
down a river,
cucumber sack
exploding, or
dandelion fluff
released by a wind
that blows and blows.

Book Signing

She approached the table, book in hand
expecting his pen and new lines on the page
to do something, mean something
personal, like the way he gripped
the ballpoint between his fingers,
so close to the tip that it stained.

She hung over him, slightly bent
her body a whisper, her name barely audible
and shaking when he asked for it
lips curved, eyes glancing upward,
holding her gaze. She thought
it must matter to him too.

But he scribbled the line simply,
in a manner of statement, function, dry prose –
words meant for anyone anywhere:
To you at the beginning of autumn.

And nothing really changed

but the temperature of the air
and the weight of the room -
the swirling of leaves in a spiral that sank
and drew her down in the wind of a sigh
that accentuated the end of summer.

Waiting for a Plane

I remember the crowd growing
– voices, bodies, heat –
and time passing,
a woman with a scarf,
bright oranges and pinks,
shoulder shoving mine,
a man, bored in a suit
against the wall, placard sign
at his side and hanging,
a grandma, wringing Kleenex
flecks of paper dust on the floor,
phones ringing, people laughing,
a baby crying and a mother's shh shh,

And then I saw him, thought maybe
I did, at once a new shape but familiar,
the line of his shoulders,
back stiffened and straight,
but also the curve of his smile,
the smell of his skin,
the voice in my ear, calm and solid.

Release

At first you come to the riverbank and slip
 into its waters for the idea of the action,
 you want to be liquid,
 but settle for something more plausible:
 the initial

splash

and drop

 of the river
 over, under, around your skin

You hold onto the air in your lungs,
 open your eyes to mud and pebbles
 disturbed, fish scattered, air
 that's escaping in bubbles.

Coming to the surface you float
 on your back with your face to the sun.
 But water is change,
 and there are rocks in this river.

White foam pulls forward, upward, outward
 smashing against boulders
 before curving around
 and you are
 falling –

it feels like you're falling
 tossed in

several	directions:
your knuckle on a rock,	your feet in the air,
your head on the bank	or the bottom of the river

So you lash out to separate from the water,
 striking with tired muscles.
 Battered, you balance and rebalance,
 then give up the pretence of balance –
 release to the crush and the blow.

Ice Climbing

You saw the pictures of me and asked
if it was hard. The truth is no.
There was something incredibly easy
about finding a pit in the surface,
a crack or a dimple to wedge an axe,
to hold while my feet kicked for purchase.
Then it was all about standing upright,
walking, almost like ascending stairs with
extra attention paid to the angle
of my feet and the solid connection
of toe pick into ice. I could dig in –
and it felt good, Marlee, to press my weight
back on my heels suspended vertical
and strong, my posture straight, demanding,
large, the frozen water smooth where I could
touch it. And besides, I didn't really know
where I was on the cliff to be scared,
couldn't look too far down (or up). Instead
the climb was like breathing, a rhythm:
axe up, foot up, kick. Stand. axe up, foot up
Easy. I found the hardest part was
hiking to the slope, unable to grip
the snow in rented boots with crampons
attached. I kept slipping, couldn't stay with
the others, like in our first class together
when I lacked the right words for poetry
scansion or workshop critique. Here my legs
were sore before I even found the ice
to climb. And then, of course, when it was done
I still had to learn to fall: unhook my
axe, release my toes, tilt back and descend.

Unfilled Space

There were sheets tangled around
my body, slicked with sweat too close,
sprawled around the absence of you –
nightmare and instinct said you were gone,
so I tucked my head, bringing my nose closer
to the smell of a borrowed shirt,
filling my lungs with you.

It wasn't enough – I placed my fingers
on their opposite shoulders,
pressed them lightly against my skin,
held my chest together and squeezed
to compress the unfilled space.

Then rolling, releasing, and separating,
the sheets peeled loose, I stood quiet
in the morning light and heard
a pluck of strings, impossible –
followed it down the hall to the living
room and saw you, your body perched
on the edge of a fireplace gone cold.

You smirked as I sat on the floor, touched
your foot and pinched my arm,
ultimately both confused and relieved.

Valentines

The roses held themselves
together tightly,
petals curved and touching,
layers soft and ordered,
in a thin glass vase on my mantle
where the light from a chocolate candle
could reflect on their shape,
the shock of red against pale
green walls and the slender shadows,
dusky behind them.

With the days, they reclined –
new versions of themselves tilted
against each other, naked and balanced,
curling and beginning to wilt.

Around Glass Fragments

the lines
of solder

silhouette
a gemmed

girl who touches
fingers

against grass
in our window.

Light flows through
and splits her

into rainbows
brushing

the back
of your neck

as you turn,
as you leave.

Again and Again

The cat

 purrs and stretches
 before
 a wide yawn reveals
 a cavern of
 stalactite teeth,

much like a place
 in Mammoth Caves
 where
 a drop of water slides down
 to change a pond
 into repeating patterns

lit by
 the flashlights of
 Dr. Joe
 and Dr. Joe Jr, alongside
 a battered mother and her child,
 who smiles shyly at

an adolescent boy
 with bruised knuckles, standing
 apart
 like some movie star
 cowboy, tilted-hat,
 who is mysterious and

untamable as he
 swagger-steps
 into
 the nearest saloon
 looking for
 a buzz, a conquest, or
 maybe redemption.

To Conquer

When he's sick,
the child asks
for a swirly straw,
the kind that twists and bends,
curling in on itself
instead of reaching upwards
like a straw should.

The design
makes the seconds
of extra suck
worthwhile -
the liquid confused
by loops and redirections
threatens
to fall again
if his lips relent.
So he does not;
every taste is a victory.

Concession

I tried to walk down the road,
away from the house, from you,
but the wind distracted me
lifting my hair, pulling it
outward so that when I stopped moving
my shadow's strands twisted,
curled, reached,
and I understood you –
your body shifting backwards,
your eyes sliding away.

Looking Glass Restaurant

The kites on the ceiling aren't flying
but they look like they could
and the fish in the aquarium circle,
providing distraction from dinner,

but they look like they could
join the table and weigh in.
Providing distraction from dinner,
the husband smiles.

Join the table and weigh in,
like the waitress with snide comments
or the husband who smiles
at his wife's next refill of wine

like the waitress. With snide comment,
a best friend looks up.
At the wife's next refill of wine
her forehead lines and lips purse.

A best friend. Look up.
See her, disgusted and tired,
her forehead lined and lips pursed.
A plea of some sort,

disgusted and tired.
The wife searches around,
a plea of some sort,
and excuses herself to the bathroom.

The wife searches. Around
the space are mirrors –
an excuse for the bathroom
she darkens her lips with Maybeline.

The space is all mirrors –
herself smiling and painted,
she darkens. Her lips with Maybeline
show red, blood red

smiling and painted
and the fish in the aquarium circle
red, blood red.
The kites on the ceiling aren't flying.

The Leaving was Routine

So it was strange,
this time, when
you left—I wasn't
empty and neither
was the house:
an orchid on
the shelf, a card
on the dresser,
women who came
with wine, my own
face pink in the mirror
saying I'm still here.

Stage Name: Vera VaVoom

I enjoyed watching you dance burlesque
last night, how you read Shakespeare sonnets
and rubbed your hands against your skirt like
it was too much fabric in the way, a barrier
between his words and your skin that must
be torn apart. And I liked your gloves between
your teeth, a tease that brought on whistles from
the crowd and made your eyes glint seduction
as you held The Complete Works against your
chest and rubbed. It was something great when you
sat down and eased your skirt up, taunting us,
then shed it with a smirk and shake of hips.
Your top was next and underneath a corset
you unhooked then clutched in place until
the music stopped, allowing us a peek
of sparkles on your breasts. What is that like?
To turn your back and sashay out of clothes
hook by hook and piece by piece? Would you laugh
to know that I was dancing where I sat
on my bar stool and that my mind was on
the stage with you? The men might cheer for me
or boo, but still I think I'd like to try:
cover myself in glitter and sequins,
slink out of clothes and learn to belly dance,
move like a snake all smooth and dangerous,
powerful, sensuous; something like you.

Ouroboros

"a symbol of the oneness of creation and destruction in renewal." – Peter Breslin,
 "Symbolism of Wedding Rings"

Dear dad, I wish there was some more to say
 besides I think I understand your ring
 and how it means you hadn't given up
 though we all thought it time, and long since past
 the point when promises lost weight and you
 became a wafting mist that clung and wrapped
 whatever you could touch and suffocate.
 I watched it all and played the part of nurse,
 a shoulder sitting on the peeling porch,
 my eyes on your finger. I now can say,
 it pissed me off that you still wore your ring.
 She married and moved on, besides you know,
 it never was that great, what had you lost?
 And what had I? You told me it was death.
 I naively shrugged at that, what did
 you know of loss compared to me and who
 I would become, a shell that waited month
 by month alone for some short time when I'd
 be whole again and suddenly less scared.
 That's what it means to be military
 support at home, you know, it is a well
 of deep and dark, your spouse unreachable
 unless he happens to remember you
 and make the effort to communicate.
 I knew of death, more than you could
 and lived it every day between the news
 on television and in every ring
 the phone offered me. Dad, did you know
 before he left (the first time) we took off
 our rings deliberately and then slipped them
 on each other's hands again? We said it
 meant something permanent –this would count
 more than an emergency removal.
 I knew when something changed, but I, like you
 still hoped to find a glimmer in the eyes.
 Do you remember teaching me
 about "snowball effect," and how one slide
 could multiply before you even knew?
 You said tv used that effect with sex
 increasing lewdness in small steps to trick
 the unaware into watching what they
 would not have otherwise tolerated.

Like that I missed how bad it was for him,
the steps were too small and he was quiet,
until the bus pulled up and he did not
get off. While other wives were grasped and twirled
I waited for my love and got a shell.
Moments went by that actually were months
where I was starved from lack of what had been
and felt like mist myself trying to hold
a marriage that was not marriage.
So yes, father I understand why you
clung to your ring, I find it hard myself,
but hope is slim and still we live, right Dad?

Birthday

Twenty-seven was the taste of Coldstone ice cream cake, three layers of chocolate covered in a hard ganache, the middle size of three options, serving up to twelve people. I didn't know twelve people.

And twenty-seven was driving my dessert back home, setting the air conditioning on full blast, easing into stoplights, one hand resting on the plastic lid to keep the whole cake from sliding.

It was my friends and your parents loading boats on a trailer, kayaking Lake Barkley, five sets of paddles rippling the water, sweat on my arms and a dip in the lake's swimming area.

And twenty-seven was all of us driving the cake to a restaurant, ordering extra plates and a knife, eating dinner first then slicing into the hard shell that gave way to pools of melted cream.