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West on an Unnamed Road

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Lisa Petra Whitaker

August 2011

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The Thesis of Lisa Petra Whitaker is approved:

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

Acknowledgments

Thank you to all my teachers, to those who have labored over these words,
and to my children.

To Kirsten and Jason

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A Crow Stands in the Zebra-Striped Crosswalk on Siskiyou Blvd.

My foot on the brake, I stare
and I remember reading somewhere

that Ringo Starr's black jacket is for sale on eBay,
with a signed letter of authenticity

from his girlfriend, Nancy Andrews.
A truck behind me honks.

The crow tilts its eye, then waddles
across another wide stripe.

In London, there's a webcam
mounted at the corner of Abbey Road,

and you can log on 24 hours a day
to watch people cross the street.

The truck driver swerves,
and misses the bird.

Tourists in the busy intersection
near Garden and Grove End Road stop

to have their picture taken.
They walk in groups of four,

and there's always someone with bare feet,
posing like McCartney.

They just want to stand,
facing the oncoming traffic, in the thrill of mid-stride.

Night Creature

I lie here, breath and heartbeat.
Maybe it jumped
or fell from the branches.

And there it goes again—the scuttering.
I try to picture it,
but it's like trying to imagine what's beyond the skin of the universe.

The scratching
softly defines the roof.
Whatever I was dreaming, I can't remember now.

Weirton, West Virginia

At night, smokestacks in rows are lit
by the background glow of the blast furnace.
Iron ore smelts with coke and limestone.

By daybreak, silt settles into cheeks
and knees, grays the seats of pants,
rings blue collars, deepens creases

in eyes. It blackens crescents under fingernails,
and calluses palms to thick pucks
that leave permanent impressions in a firm handshake.

Touching Gray Matter

When our professor asked for a volunteer,
I didn't know

I'd be holding
a brain.

I ran my fingers over smooth crevasses,
and thought about thoughts—her thoughts.

On the porch that night,
the man I loved

read me Neruda.
I pressed his palm against my forehead,

and remembered
being a child, eyes wide and immortal,

someone's warm hand
always resting softly on my head.

New Shoes

I bite into a pickle,
and I'm outside the diner at Woolworths in 1970.

The sidewalk's so hot my feet sting.
But it's just a quick step

past the bus stop, the Five and Dime
to Thom McCann's.

The salesman hunches on a slanted stool,
and cold metal slides to measure my bare foot.

I'm still young enough to believe
new tennis shoes run faster.

The man's thumb pushes on my big toe,
and then my mother's two fingers,

the walk to the door and back,
and then the run—

eyes closed, pumping fists and shins,
the traffic on West Street

fresh tar, bus fumes,
the hug of new canvas in gripping laces,

and a feeling,
tight between the ribs, that I'm unstoppable.

A Certain Uncalm

Every farmer knows it.
Trees quiet and start as if each leaf were tin against tin.

The grass breathes.
Blades synchronize, bend, bristle, bend.

And you estimate the distance
between the road and the path through the honeylocusts.

A flash of dusk's silver bones.
Crows scatter above the old telephone wires.

Caution: High Temperature

There's a foot of snow outside,
and I'm huddled under a blanket
inches from the register's vent,
reading the manufacturer's warning printed on its metal edge,

and I'm thinking about spontaneous human combustion,
and the first time I heard the term in the sixth grade,
along with stories of close encounters of the third kind,
and the electromagnetic forces
that sucked airplanes
into the Bermuda Triangle.

That was the same year our teacher, Mr. Onishi,
talked about Hiroshima,
and someone asked if it was true
that the A bomb blackened walls leaving white shadows
like human cookie cutouts in the shapes of children.

And before spring break, our Weekly Reader featured photos
of volcanic disasters
and the plaster casts of Pompeii—those who had fallen
while trying to escape the suffocating ash—a mother curled
with an infant at her side.

We tried to outdo each other with tales of the gruesome.
Someone swore the poet Lord Byron drank wine from a human skull,
like a Tibetan Kapala in some sort of sipping ritual,
a Buddhist reminder to not waste time,
which, in the sixth grade, was all we ever did.

Gazing, After Rain

Clouds float slowly
over brown hills.

Here and there, light
drops threads

across drenched fields.
Thin spotlights drift, silvering

roofs of red barns,
tinting rows of fence-clustered

sunflowers, still bent
under the weight

of their own seed. Light
brings out the purple sheen

on the backs of black cows
standing in wet grass.

Twin-Tandem Tod, Weirton Steel

The last mill engine is silent,
high-pressure cylinders

now rusted out drums.
Rods house frozen clamps

fastened to massive cogs.
But on the front porch,

after the children have been called
upstairs to bathe, someone

tells again how Starvaggi
stepped off a boat in New York

with five dollars in his pocket.
The lawn chairs and the stories unfold.

Piston valves hiss.
Two steam giants spin rollers,

moving orange sheets
of liquefied steel.

Between

You whisper something
against my shoulder.

A mower coughs.
Maybe its morning.

I know that sound.
The neighbor's dog. Barking.

And a few blocks away.
Another dog. Howls.

The blankets or my skin,
I can't tell. Sun, window blinds,

wax lips, blood oranges,
I must be dreaming. Except

the circles you're tracing on my hip
seem so real.

Rust Belt: Weirton, WV

The factories
stand closed.
They've boarded
the windows
and padlocked
the gates.

The amber night sky
settles black.
Smoke stacks
are hollow silos
collecting rain.

Waiting for the Bell

I come across a manual pencil sharpener
at a garage sale

the kind that was always bolted to the wall
near the door in grade school,

and I can still hear Eddie Whistler
grinding his pencil for the sheer joy

of being out of his seat,
while the entire class practiced

Beginner's Penmanship.
The slanted lines, the oval O's,

the wide-lined paper still damp
with mimeograph ink, its chemical

musk competing with Sloppy Joes,
their tomato smell trailing from the cafeteria.

We couldn't tell time, but we knew
when the big hand and the little hand

pointed to twelve we could line up for lunch,
and so we watched the clock's slow stubborn tick.

Dusk: Weirton, West Virginia

It's a summer ritual of sorts,
something a long day's work has earned,

the right to close the eyes, to sit.
I watch his chin nod to his chest. His breath

wheezes between his teeth and a cigar
that grows a tail of ash. The front porch,

a sagging lawn chair, a few wood steps.
The night is a heap of damp mown grass.

Plates clink, kitchen cupboards close,
someone's turned the bathwater on upstairs.

Late locusts clatter in the darkness.

Imaginary Mother

She moves in a noisy silence,
a rectangle of cool sun across the sink,

the stove's electric orange
the only warmth.

Coffee percolates into a glass knob.
The silverware drawer dips,

and then the ironing board.
The toaster springs.

She begins the folding—
the Wonderbread, the wax paper,

the crease down the arm of a tiny shirt.
Spray starch. Steam.

Nylon toes into work shoes,
her keys, her coat, her purse. She's late.

The Tupperware. She stops
to tuck the napkins into paper sacks.

In the cafeteria
that doubles as an art room,

and smells of Elmer's glue
and Tater Tots,

we're not the only kids without
a lunch, and when we open our brown bags,

we find those flowery paper napkins
and they're folded.

Crossing the Ohio

Rain, windshield wipers
tick.

Market Street Bridge smudges,
sharpens,

smudges again, crossbeam
after crossbeam in the blade's wide arc.

Tires hum a riff
over metal grates.

This gray town,
if you don't downshift you miss it,

steep grade,
deer crossing, skunk and pine,

the dip, the swag
of the mill roof,

boxcars parked
on asphalt-covered tracks.

From Prairie Avenue to 181st Street

It's like stepping into cold water,
hearing the rumor today that I was never supposed to hear.

Cracks in the sidewalk. Suddenly I'm barely thirteen again
carrying a stack of books,

and Danika Welker is following me home from school.
Words seem more intimidating spoken to the back of the head.

If I could stand face to face with my scrawny self,
I like to think I'd give some sage advice,

but I'd probably not say much.
Nothing I could say would change the long walk home.

Spanish Colonial Mission

There's a sadness here,
a somberness in the way the clouds roll out

from behind the purple mountain, their bellies as gray
as beached fish.

Maybe it's the lonesome barn,
the only manmade structure for miles.

Or maybe there's languish in this kind of beauty—
scattered light

on abandoned adobe,
reddening the terracotta tiles.

Another Santa Ana

If you've ever lived inland,
you know its scream.

This cat-in-heat
scratch-the-doorpost wind.
It bangs the gate all night, coyotes down from the hills,
yanks your sheets off,
finds you reaching for a lover in your sleep.

It shakes the eucalyptus,
jabbars the crows,

riddles the chain link fence
with tumbleweeds.

A plastic bag levitates.
Barking dog.

Sand on the window blinds.
A brown bird thumps the glass and is gone.

A Red Box Kite Dips Above It

The evening brings a wet chill.
Waves fan out erasing holes where children dug castles

and lovers had walked.
Seagulls scavenge trash barrels.

A few stragglers screech overhead.
In the distance,

a wedding photographer
tells a couple to stand this way,

to put an arm here, a hand here.
Be natural,

he finally tells them
and they remember how to touch.

Chasing Barns

I don't know why they draw me here
these empty frames.

Why I drive miles of back road to abandoned fields,
leave my car parked by broken barbed wire

to stand alone
facing their gaping mouths.

Maybe an old hurt still sways in the rafters,
or maybe they just remind me of home.

To photograph barns,
you can't avoid their sadness,

but sometimes you uncover a tinderbox,
with supports so frail

if you kicked a two-by-four
it would buckle,

and you stare
because despite the patterned rot beneath the eaves

its sagging door
and windows smile.

Ashland, Oregon

On Guanajuato street everything hangs
from green awnings:

hemp-braided purses,
Peruvian beads, indigo cotton. A pink tutu sags

from the hips of an old woman
selling fairy wands.

Boys with dirty-blond dreadlocks strum
beside an open guitar case—yellow velvet

and a few tossed coins—while a girl paints
henna mandalas, the universe tattooed

in a circle on her belly,
her navel a hole in the center.

At the Creek, Chasing a Blue Heron

The daylight haze has settled into evening's thin line.
Damp earth reeks like a bug jar.

The scent takes me to the copper-tinged field
beside the shed where we lie studying new bodies,

tracing curves—
commas and question marks—hesitating.

In the treetop
the night-heavy bird flaps to another branch.

Barn at the Base of the Siskiyou

A missing door.
A boxed emptiness.

A crow
atop the sugar maple tilts its head.

The roof.
The holes.

The fallen shingles.
Windows

stare
like someone dying alone.

A roadside mailbox
slants.

Beyond the barbed wire,
the horizon is a fat lizard.

Its tail curves,
cups a sun so white it silvers. Light

expands, breathes
through the rafters,

cracks
around the rectangles.

An Ordinary Day

Even now I hear them, a high-pitched shriek, the ambulance
whining past, the long honks of the fire engine.

And moments later,
I can't even imagine.

We lived near an old folks home,
so when I walked back on Arden way,

I didn't think
about the sirens. Every now and then

his mother would yell at him
from the kitchen window to get out of the street.

He cried because we told him he couldn't help us lift the stones
to collect the rollie pollies.

We braided hair. We chalked a new hopscotch pattern
on Angela Frickey's driveway,

because the last one was lopsided and the slanted rectangles
got smaller and smaller as we skipped.

On Mornings When the Muse Absconds

A dog yowls
in the neighbor's yard.
Tires crunch gravel
in the alley.
Someone hammers
a roof.

Frost withdraws
to the corners of the glass.
The yard is still.

A red bloom bends
and shakes
the late snow.

The Santa Annas

Winds hijack clouds,
force them farther and farther
south, until their skirts bunch up
against the slopes.

Crows can't escape the gusts,
scatter and dip from limb
to limb, until the acacias shake them out,
tossing shiny black pennies to the blue.

One crow clings
to a rotting caboose, the breeze banging
empty boxcars the way too many thoughts rattle my head.
I squint past chaparral rolling

over ruined fields, cleaving to fences—one tangled weed
summersaults toward me
like a roaming lost dog. I stagger,
as dust shrouds

the dead valley, a huge poncho spinning,
blinding me, stinging my lips,
slapping my forehead, cheeks, and chin
with so much grit.

Indian Summer

Bare-kneed we run toward the back porch
eager to help shuck corn.

We peel moist husks,
strip the cobs bare, twist, tear the fibrous greens,
snapping the nub.
Rub flaxen threads off autumn kernels.

We drop cobs in steel pots,
dump husks on brown paper bags.

Familiar voices nag us.
Wash your hands.

The screen door twangs and bangs,
as we run out back to the sun-soft garden hose
careful not to soak our shoes
in the warm first bursts of water. Red rover!

Red rover! We dash back and forth
until the sun sinks under the horizon's edge,
nudging blue shadows
further east.

Creek Stones

There's a kind of cold that locks the body.
Light drifts.

I've dreamt this chill,
sipping ice from a metal spoon.

A sudden wobble.
Jacket and scarf can't defend

against a stream
that travels shin bone to spine.

Beyond Words

First tree
to turn—
more yellow
than yellow.

Ink
can't describe
the creek's blackness.
Orange—too pale
to name the floating leaves.

Blue Heron at Lithia Creek

I like to think the gray hook-necked bird
in the treetop above the footbridge

tolerates us,
that it's used to the sound

of morning footsteps
across the planks.

Its open eye
follows our straight necks,

and stares
at our lack of wings.

An Uncertain Gait

Beyond Tolman Creek, hills
lose their edges.

Ground fog thickens
and tumbles out from the dogwood.
Deer wander

in and out of the brush. Ears perk
in fear or wonder.

Slender noses lead loping limbs, pause.
Heads fade

to white,
except for eyes.

Leaving Ashland

It's one of those days
where the moments slow as if they want to be counted

or named. The sun hasn't quit,
but rain spatters the windshield with mirrors.

Black branches whip past.
Silver clouds split like canyons.

And when you breathe,
you can almost feel the shape of each rib.

The River Woman

She was a wife once, before she was
a woman,

before her hips had spread.
Beside a taffeta gown

tossed wrong-side-out, she learned how
to love a man, to relax

into his whisper
and watch her body unfold.

She wore his scent on her clothes,
wrote his name as her own, slept

in the bend of his elbow.
One night she slipped from her body

and walked to the river—water a rush
of crickets under the moon.

She found a mantis.
Silence met silence.

When her skin found her, she was
walking alone beside a creek.

On the Edge

On my evening walk,
a boy of eight or nine climbs
onto the flat roof of the abandoned mill.
Arms extended, he tight-ropes
the ledge.

My own eight-year-old shoulders
slip through bent bars atop the twenty-foot wall
of our elementary school.

Feet wedge and wedge again.
All arms, fists and precision,
I grip the wrought-iron fence.

Someone yells.
I look down.

The boy teeters
and I manage to stifle a shout.

Moving to Chicago

Today I rolled the metal door down
on the storage unit.

Boxes tilt with everything I own,
and you're emptying half your hangers

to make room for my clothes.
I can picture your shirts holding their breath.

And love is like that—
simple.

My luggage still strapped with airport tags.
Your old Chucks in a bag for the Goodwill.

The Barista with the Long Black Hair

I don't want to stare at her,
bloated cheeks, doughy skin, black circles
around eyes.

No eyebrows, a baseball cap
low on the forehead
that doesn't quite cover the baldness above her ears.

She's at the espresso machine, steaming milk
when she should be under a down comforter,
her head against a fluffed pillow, someone handing her tea.

She's stacked the white coffee cups
in perfect, perfect, rows.

Dancing in a Teaspoon

You and I,
our Novembers as unsure
as fog above the New York skyline. Hours

staring at a rough draft, you erase and rewrite
the same word,
while I lie in your t-shirt on your bed,
thinking.

“What did your mother mean?
You lower your coffee-
stained pages,
and glance at my body.

Composite Drawing: January 2010

I.

I want to write this,
but I'm not sure I can.

II.

I want to tell you about yellow caution tape, and a girl's pale body,
limbs twisted, left dead except for a thin breath he didn't notice.

III.

He is a white male, 5'8 to 5'10,
stocky build,
light sandy-blond hair.

IV.

I want to tell you about the day I walked the creek and saw a blue-green station wagon
parked near the reservoir and heard the voice of a woman and saw a man about my
height, 5'8," get out of the driver's seat and get into the back of the car, shouting.

V.

Maybe they're having an argument.

VI.

I want to tell you about the day I saw an artist's sketch of a man on the news.

Vertigo

Who ever thinks about the bony labyrinth
of the inner ear?

Or the water that sloshes there
like a bubble in a level?

Days when the wind hits you sideways
icing an earlobe,

you notice all the trees that lean,
the tilted

telephone poles, the slanted
billboards,

the lopsided mouths
forcing a smile.

The Orchard on Greenspot Road

The sky's gray sweater
unravels.

They've lit the smoke pots in the groves.
Legs untangle.

We walk the rows.
The dimming fires flicker branches across the path.

White blossoms,
a faint orange breath.

The Fever

It's not what I expected.
The past doesn't flash in reel-to-reel.
 It slowly reveals itself like a striptease: silk

off-the-shoulder,
 curve of breast, hint of nipple, silk.

Air,
narrowing windpipe, I breathe,

sink into the skin—
 into the skin of the skin—

where I glimpse my tiny hand, printing my name with sidewalk chalk.

In the Syrup of an Overcast Day

When the fog rolls in, it rolls in layers,
fog obscuring fog.

Grizzly peak grows a purple fin
and submerges.

The day is a blank.
Crows grow even blacker in the mist,

and every fold and extension and rowing of wing
seems a slow, deliberate, motion.

On a New Purple Huffy
for Charles

You never forget
how to ride,
or the hands that first held you steady,
the seat too high,
toes barely touching asphalt,
feet eager to pump.

The kickstand clunks, and the stomach
tries to smooth its knots.
The knees want to go,
but you've never learned how to stop.
You don't even know how to fall.

So his fingers grip the sissy bar.
Shoes clop the pavement behind you,

past the fire hydrant, the tree,
the first parked car,
until his feet pound so hard

you know he's let go.
The wobble. He yells *pedal*,
and you pedal.

Variations on a Theme

after Martha Borjon Kubota

Let's scatter January the way a clock releases its springs.
Let's scatter February the way noon unfastens its soft throat.
Let's scatter March until March spills shadows like broken coals on ash-fire.
Let's scatter April until we tear ourselves on sharp hours, falling into white.
Let's scatter May until our limbs are wet and the dry earth cries *home*.
Let's scatter June into onion skins.
Let's scatter July and break its red bricks into bread loaves.
Let's scatter August and hold its new bones.
Let's scatter September until its pieces grow skin, and eyes, and teeth.
Let's scatter October and break wooden toes into sawdust.
Let's scatter November and gather its crumbs into empty pockets.
Let's scatter December into moons.

When Grief Wakes

A wishbone snaps.
The desk chair teeters
and it's that moment

when the stomach grabs a lung
and you can almost hear
the back of your head crack linoleum,
but the floor dissolves. You fall

through a blue that's almost black,
as blue as a tarnished spoon,
then you crash through a roof
and land in a bed where a stranger sleeps.

Faces on the Glass

Cold mornings
you stare past the window

with a gaze so hard it's clear
you don't see the melting snow.

Purple crocuses scream silent,
hinged open like the mouths of nesting birds.

The Poetry of Photography

It's that split second
when you're aware

the crickets have stopped flumping the ankles.
The sparrows have quit

trading branches.
Even the jittered moths light nearby.

And the sun, it saturates
a different wedge of sky.

Where's the time gone? The barrel
of the lens blackens

the periphery again, and you notice
the camera's weight in your hands.

Dragonflies twist
mid-flight. Their tiny bodies spin

a double helix
above the lake's silver tread.

Weirton Steel

Weirton, West Virginia

The men were the mill. Their hands pulled the levers
that lowered cranes and closed jaws,
clamping twisted metal scrap.

Their straining arms and salt-stained backs tilted
ladles of orange molten iron. The men
were the mill—not only the men, but the women

who washed gray work shirts, scrubbed slag
and mud off steel-toed boots, filled thermoses
with black coffee, packing last night's leftover pork

chops in aluminum foil along with biscuits
and margarine tucked in tin lunch pails
at four a.m. The men were the mill, and the women

with red and callused hands
who fed the men—the men who fed the furnace
that fed the mill, which left its leavings for the town.