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# Back to back they faced each other

Lisa Marie Johnson  
*University of Iowa*

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BACK TO BACK THEY FACED EACH OTHER

by

Lisa Marie Johnson

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the  
Master of Arts degree in Art  
in the Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

May 2011

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Isabel Barbuzza

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Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Lisa Marie Johnson

has been approved by the Examining Committee  
for the thesis requirement for the Master of Arts  
degree in Art at the May 2011 graduation.

Thesis Committee:

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Isabel Barbuzza, Thesis Supervisor

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Laurel Farrin

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Sue Hettmansperger

for Tom

One bright day in the middle of the night  
Two dead boys got up to fight.  
Back to back they faced each other  
Drew their swords and shot one another.  
A deaf policeman heard the noise  
And ran to save the two dead boys.  
If you don't believe me that it's true,  
Go ask the blind man  
He saw it, too.

author unknown

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## LIST OF FIGURES

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## **THE FIGURES**

Jump ropes twirling  
One finger taps the watch face  
Keeping time

Figure 1. Setting

here.            you walk toward us on delicately folded pages.

Oklahoma grain fields  
Open farmlands  
Hand and foot games  
Just-have-faiths

turn on the lights,  
open the window out.

we have shared stories and shared pacts we agree on.

white scars circle our wrists like flowers  
promises

Go-on-outside-now  
Hush-now-kids  
Double dutch

there is dust on the horizon as your stories gallop away.

Figure 2. Sonia

Shy laughter  
Runs around the room  
Freeze! tag

Figure 3. Lucy

Tiny tooth gap  
A wide smile opens up  
Hips swaying

Figure 4. Miranda

The sink where we wash our hands  
Sports a hairline crack  
I slip through the blue porcelain  
Turned grey  
As the soap suds down  
Watch the bubbles  
In the courtyard  
Little girls play magic with  
Their memories  
The jacks splay the pavement,  
Dancing.

Figure 5. Shaina

Outside the fence  
She waves to us  
One blade of grass

Figure 6. Bee

shorty

Figure 7. Nadine



Mamma  
Mz. Thang  
Hey lady  
Beautiful.  
Albino mane  
Stones throw  
Sway those hips  
Toss it.

Polished floors  
One square of sunshine  
Bare feet dancing

Figure 9. Rosalynd

The Rules of the Land  
Are Specific enough,  
Princess,  
Toss that book out the window.  
Risk it all  
For a Subway sandwich

A folding chair  
On the basketball court  
Legs crossed

Figure 11. Izabel

The grownups take my small voice  
And put it in a cup  
We tie the ends with string  
Walking the telephone out  
Our voices sing red plastic  
While Grandma's eggs are cooking

All you have to do is look at me to see this.

Figure 13. Dara

In five different plays  
You read the child  
Running after your sisters  
Watcha' doingtakemewithyoucan I come?  
You walk like a playground swing  
Sway sway the wind  
The children are laughing  
Give them a ride.  
On stage it's a merry-go-round  
Carriage horses pass on rollers  
Mirrors spin the audience  
Hop scotch in my pocket.

little girl, jump, jump  
two pigtails sideways  
dandelion puffs

Figure 15. Faith



Figure 16. All of us lined up together.

**END NOTES**

Since March 2010 I have been working with a group of women inmates in a collaborative arts ensemble. Together, we form a group we call The Eva Luna Project. We write plays together; we perform them. Our work is built directly from personal story. We work with the unspoken, the low-decibel, the cannot-tell. We speak these things out loud.

*What does it mean to listen?*

*What does it take to be heard?*

This book is a collection of my responses to silence, laughter, freeze tag and double-dutch. Sonia keeps time, Lucy runs around the room, Samara tells a story. We begin. Some days we fall over laughing; others, we walk across a silenced darkness, tossing ropes to one another.

What we have found, together, is that there is power and resonance in the sheer act of speaking. We tell what hasn't been told, what isn't spoken, because speaking forms the ground we stand on.

These poems are what have grown from that ground.

## **AFTER WORD**

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