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Back to back they faced each other

Lisa Marie Johnson
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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

MASTER'S THESIS

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: _____
Isabel Barbuzza, Thesis Supervisor

_____
Laurel Farrin

_____
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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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.

Figure 8. Lila

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

Figure 10. Samara

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

Figure 12. Geneva

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.

Figure 14. Leigh

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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