

Spring 2017

House

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House

A Thesis

Presented To

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, Washington

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree

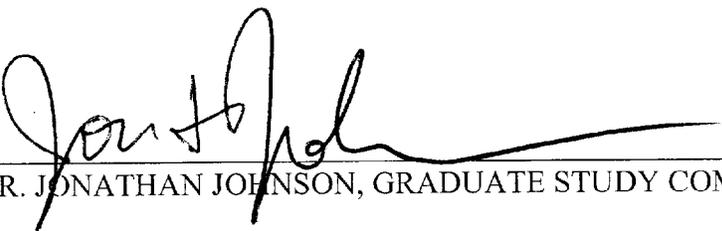
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

By

Lisa Ann Spears

Spring 2017

THESIS OF LISA ANN SPEARS APPROVED BY


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Table of Contents

	My Mother Was My First House -----	1
I.	The Cross at Yellow Brick Road-----	2
	Still Life-----	4
	Catching Dad-----	5
	The Day Between Two Trees-----	7
II.	The Cross at Yellow Brick Road-----	9
	Adult Child's Penance-----	11
	The Flood-----	12
III.	The Cross at Yellow Brick Road-----	13
	Sketch-----	15
IV.	The Cross at Yellow Brick Road-----	16
	Bipolar Balloon-----	18
	The Letter 8-----	19
V.	The Cross at Yellow Brick Road-----	20
	The Teeing Ground-----	21
	Little Left Hand-----	23
	The Weight of Straw and a Tale Too Sad and True-----	24
VI.	The Cross at Yellow Brick Road-----	26
	Playing Peter Pan-----	28
	The Pack-----	29
	Dinner with Dan Rather on a Sunday Afternoon-----	30
	Losing Chlorophyll on Greenleaf St.-----	31
VII.	The Cross at Yellow Brick Road-----	32
	The Code-----	33
	Flight School-----	36
	Furlough-----	37
VIII.	The Cross at Yellow Brick Road-----	38
	The Shack-----	39

VIII.	The Cross at Yellow Brick Road-----	40
	ReCalling-----	42
	The Dwelling-----	43
	Ode to Eternity-----	44
Epilogue:	The Cross at Yellow Brick Road-----	46
	Home-----	47
	Vita-----	48

My Mother Was My First House

She breaks out the fatted calf
and clothes me in jewels
for, I have returned.

The Cross at Yellow Brick Road

I.

I sit and listen to the eulogy.

It's over.

They try to shut the lid.

"Wait, I need her cross. Give me the cross."

The room is quiet now.

The box is gone.

They have hidden her from me.

I run into the streets, over hills and city blocks.

I can see the cemetery.

The tombstones are gray little bricks surrounded by the toothpicks of a wrought iron gate.

I'm almost there.

She jumps out at me.

Her dress is filled with patterns of springtime flowers.

"Shhh," her forefinger touches her lips.

"I'm not there."

I squeeze her hand so tight, and we begin to run away as fast as we can from the gravediggers.

As I awaken, I hear the hum of the refrigerator, the sigh of my dog, and the

breath of my own daughter beside me.

I pray that it was real.

I need her to know that I know.

I lived in darkness, the covering of a black shroud.

And I, the writer, giver of words, shared a new dawn.

I called the light, "Recovery," and the night, my Mother.

Still Life

In all our travels,
Mom lost our childhood photos.

Some were on the trail of cars repossessed,
others locked in evictions.

I am a baby and
Dad is holding me,

Mom is touching
the hem of my dress,

as if we are still connected,
sustaining each other

for the life
we couldn't picture.

Catching Dad

Wasn't easy
He was the top Ten
Most wanted

Mostly wanted by me
Past the guards and
Lookout towers

I was born in '63
Mostly wanted
By my mother

Who wanted him too
Fast cars and women
Became her competition

Catching Dad

Wasn't easy
Not for the F.B. I.
On the trail everyday

There's that lady
A little girl and baby
And an alias or two

Wow what a cover up
Like Bonnie and Clyde
But Mom wasn't Bonnie

Oh how she cried
Fake Billy Jean
Singing lullabies

Catching Dad

Wasn't easy
For the man dressed in blue
Who got a bullet

And a funeral too
His wife got the flag
For two small children

Like us all
Catching Dad
Getting caught.

(In memory of my Sioux maternal grandmother
who passed away when my parents were running)

The Day Between Two Trees

I remember
only one day,

together,
we went fishing.

You spread a pallet
between two trees
like a hammock.

You placed me
in the circle
of your bowed knees.

The fish were not fooled.
The water was still.

Then, you picked
a blade of grass.

Your left arm
guiding
my left arm.

Your right hand
guiding
my right hand.

You placed the grass
between my two thumbs
to make a whistle.

Inhale, together.

My back nesting deeper
into the cavern of your chest,

a frame for everything green.

The Cross at Yellow Brick Road

II.

My mom loved roses, my dandelions, and the “Wizard of Oz.”

She loved hot chocolate on a cold day, and to hold me warm on a cold night.

She was afraid of scary movies, and was scared a lot.

She was an artist and sketched many faces.

She never drew her own.

Mom was born on New Year’s Eve in 1943.

Her name was Judith Sue.

She had an older brother, Jimmy.

Her mother was a half Sioux Native American.

Her Father was a Norwegian/Swede.

His parents were immigrants from Norway.

Her maternal grandmother left her reservation, and did her best to hide her heritage due to horrible racism at the time.

Mom and her brother were place in a state orphanage when she was three years old.

She held on to Pinky, a favorite doll.

My uncle snuck between floors to console her when she cried.

She was pushed down a tube fire escape and became claustrophobic throughout her life.

My grandmother stole them from the children's home after eighteen months.

They were poor.

Mom was sexually abused throughout childhood by her stepdad who was a boxer.

* I have out of body experiences now. I have climbed into her life.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

I remove this plank from my eye,

put her shoes on.

Adult Child's Penance

Forgive me, my Mother
I have sinned.

It has been a lifetime
since my last confession.

I made you as a god,
director of it all—

how the sun rises, and
how the day ends.

You were
only human.

Seventy times seven
I remember.

The Flood

She gave me a galaxy,
moon, stars, and
Jupiter's ring,

drawn with magic marker
covering dents and paint chips
on my bedroom ceiling.

The next day, after school
I opened my door
to the sun rising on the east wall.

Daffodils and tulips
rose from the floor,
growing from grayed white trim.

When the rain came,
the roof leaked.
We ran for buckets,
catching colors.

The Cross at Yellow Brick Road

III.

At sixteen, Mom has her first big dance.

She moves like a swan, dizzy with glory.

Her date looks like Audie Murphy.

An audience has cleared the floor.

Crossing lights blink red through the darkness with a car full of teens
that won't stop.

Her fear is mingled with shards of blood and glass.

She has a large scar on her knee after their car is hit by a train.

On her first car date, she is almost raped and unravels her foot to honk
the horn.

Her face is red and wet.

Her friends come running.

She works at a nursing home for a time.

They are shorthanded and teach her how to give shots when she is only an
aide.

She is proud of this and wants to be a real nurse.

My mother had dreams like we all do.

She wanted a husband, a home, and a family.

Then, she met my father.

Sketch

First, she drew the outline,
and it was a perfect likeness
of suburban life in the seventies.

A small house, a
cloudless sky, a
weeping willow, a
car in the drive.

A few kids,
a white picket fence,
a porch framed with
morning glory flowers.

She must have drawn
that picture
for hours.

Everything was standing
in the distance.

The Cross at Yellow Brick Road

IV.

My father had what a shy girl craves: convertibles, pool cues, leather shoes, and a persona like James Dean.

He could have been an actor, but he was a con.

He was gone most nights, weekends, and holidays.

When they did go out, Mom wore only the best.

He saw to that.

She was a trophy: petite, wholesome, and sophisticated.

Eventually, she found him in bed with a short list of friends, and my uncle's wife.

When I was born in '63, I only weighed two pounds and four ounces.

My mother came to the hospital every day with my grandmother.

She prayed and lit candles at the church.

Dad threw fits a lot about a shirt not ironed or a hair on his plate.

Mom stayed home with me, hiding bruises and black eyes.

Mom said our house on Montgomery lane had a white picket fence in '66.

She wasn't there much in the evening.

She had a new job making five to eight hundred dollars a night.

If she was going to act like a whore and flirt with his friends,
he would make her one.

Black hair piled high.

Black streaks down her face.

Bipolar Balloon

Rainbows in valleys
Clowns in a tree

Riding the sky
Just you and me

Clouds are red blue
Purple and green

Orange neurons on fire
Always tinged in yellow

The storm is coming
You will deflate

Losing
Happy

Strapped
Rubber doll.

The Letter 8

She sits making octopus dolls
out of yarn and Styrofoam balls
token gifts for me,
her daughter.

This seems to calm her
delusions of God,
pied piper flight
to the mental hospital.

Jet- lag fuel
of thorazine,
patients piss
on magazines.

Don't take me back
my mother screams
on the way
to shock therapy.

Zzss...zzs....Z.

I count eight.

Yarn legs to wrap around me
howling at the moon.

The Cross at Yellow Brick Road

V.

Mom quit working in '67.

My father and three other men had pulled an armed robbery at a grocery store in Kentucky.

A policeman was shot and killed.

We were on the run.

My sister was almost born in a cab over a year later.

By then, we were in New Orleans.

They wouldn't let the driver cut through the Mardi Gras parade.

My mother was twenty-five.

She was alone.

She was Mrs. Billy Jean Smith.

They arrested dad two weeks later.

He was sentenced to Death Row, and later life in prison.

Life in the early 70's didn't offer a single mother much.

There was no free child care, 1-800's offering escape from domestic violence, or self-help/loving yourself classes.

The Teeing Ground

The brick house on the corner of Route 29 stood vacant.
The yard was impeccably neat, and
Seemed to weed and mow itself.

Its only flaw was a silvery propane gas tank
Centered perfect in the back yard.
An occasional wildflower growing up the side,
Never enough to decorate it.

That corner became our rest stop
On long walks to the golf course.
No, we were not avid golfers,
Only four children of a single mother.

Summer was the best season
So, we would offer our help,
Wading to the knee in makeshift ponds
Looking for golf balls.

We would fill the bucket to the brim
Then, Mom would place it in the stroller basket
With baby Sis for the long walk home.

One approaching spring,
A mother bird took up residence
At the top of the propane tank.

The farmer straw spilled
From the lid
Like a makeshift hat.

We would race to the corner backyard
Then, ever so gently,
Raise the silver top.

Mom's admonishment never to touch
An egg or a feather
Stayed fresh in my mind,

Like the blue of her eyes
When they flew away.

Little Left Hand

My father is left-handed
I am too
I sneak my hand
in my pocket
past the prison guards

Beyond the bars and
over the walls
I take it

Home to help me
pray
for my father's return.

The Weight of Straw and a Tale Too Sad and True

On a summer day in '73,
the straw was heavy
like a ton of hay on Mom,
except it was our dog's leg on top
of burdens.

It happened, I will tell you,
just like this.

We were walking along minding our own,
mom pulling groceries with the Radio Flyer,
Bang. We heard the gunshot.
Bang. Sam had three legs.

We took cover behind the cattails
of the irrigation ditch,
huddled like stones.

I say that's when all our painful roads converged.

Mom is a gentle soul that married a con man, you see.
By the time I was three my dad had shot a cop dead.
He was on the Top Ten Most Wanted and they
were hunted and running. Mom couldn't go
to my grandma's wake and my little sister
was born with a fake name in Louisiana.
We moved so many times after his
arrest, and mom never asking
much for herself, just trying
to make things right and
a farmer uses
our dog for
skeet.

It all piles up to that leg
pink flesh to the bone
coming out of his upper thigh.

How that leg hangs and gangles
to the circular gait of his walk,
and blood spurts on the
hot tar road.

Soon they locked her up in the hospital,
and the neighbors say she is crazy.
Mom thinks someone is out to get us.

The Cross at Yellow Brick Road

VI.

Mom tried her best.

For a while, she drew portraits for money.

She sold them for ten dollars apiece.

Her picture of Jesus won first place at the state fair.

My uncle entered it for her.

She pulled our laundry and groceries in a wagon.

When we walked, she sang, teaching me all the words to

“You’ll Never Walk Alone.”

She bought me a bike with a flower basket, and rolled her own
cigarettes.

I’d like to say that life is better now, but, on a road this crooked it is
hard to find a straight path.

She had four more children, my brother, and then, two more sisters.

We ran from men with heavy hands or loaded guns.

We ran from voices that gave no escape.

I blamed her for it, that tornado.

I painted her black.

I made it her, and it never was.

She always came back home.

When we were reunited after her stay at the hospital, she always
cried happy tears.

We would pile five in the bed.

Our four heads lay on one chest.

Playing Peter Pan

Some days I wore
my childhood
like an apron.

Saving my siblings
from Captain Could
Be Husbands

-or-

watching the kids
while my mother's mind
went to Neverland.

Some days I wore
my childhood
like the dancing star.

She was the center.

I looked out at the world
through her eyes

-and-

danced to the
thrum of our interlaced fingers.

The Pack

Although there must have been color,
I only remember white that winter.
It was almost as if
we didn't exist at all
if not for the stray dogs.

They saw three kids, a woman, and a wagon,
saw our silhouettes
in the snow,
and began to follow us,

Then, to take the lead
through drifts and ditches
past McClelland farm,
up and over
the cemetery hill,

Until, we could feel
the glistening,
until we could see
the light
of the corner IGA.

Dinner with Dan Rather on a Sunday Afternoon

Mom claimed the television
once a day.
Often, she pulled out dinner trays, and
amidst a flurry of protest,
we watched the evening news.

Imagine my dismay when
waving frantically, she
ushered me in from play
on a Sunday afternoon.

Breaking News:
The Prisoners of War are returning
from Vietnam.

We watch the screen as
the planes land.

I feel that they are someone's
father, brother, or son
with the rising and falling crescendo of

Mom's hand gripping mine,
each time
a soldier descends the stairs,
touching home.

Losing Chlorophyll on Greenleaf St.

The leaves are weeping again
I have raked and stuffed bags
past the periphery of Oz and Nod

Yet, they return

Mom is still in her chair
I am playing hopscotch
past the crooked stairs.

Turn the corner
house on the left
my best friend's brother
shoots heroin in the basement

At 13 he will no longer watch out for me
the state has taken my siblings and
the sky is falling

I return at twenty-three
to find only
a cement parking lot

The leaves are curled and
puddles brown

I hear names in the wind
again and again

I reach down
for a helicopter seed
to place in my pocket

I return home
a different way
to another season.

The Cross at Yellow Brick Road

VII.

In the summer of '77 dad got paroled from prison.

He took my sister and me.

With Mom's illness and their history, I am sure she didn't have a choice.

I still feel the blue in her eyes that day.

For years, I thought I wanted him.

I just wanted normal.

He was a fairytale, my prince who never got past the lookout tower.

He was back in prison within four years.

I saw him three weeks before he died.

I'm sure he had a story.

I don't know it; I never did.

The Code

I spent a lot of time at Kent State,
that's the pen, and not the school.

It was there, I learned the lingo
where rat, pig, snitch, and hole
began to take form.

I was the daughter of #K07594
I took that responsibility seriously.

I listened to the huddled conversations
between my parents when they thought
I wasn't listening.

They thought I was wiping slobber
off my baby brother, or
nursing my wounded knee.

That's how I knew that
Panky never ratted,

That they never found
the gun,

That a pretty boy was shanked
for putting the finger on
so and so, and

A hole wasn't in the ground.

It was my way of being
on the inside
when most of life
was on the out.

I answered questions
like expected.

Life was fine, and

school was good.

I had to protect my father
from the harsh realities of
the outside world.

It was a job I had assigned myself
early on.

I gave it all up
when he came home.

For a while, after his release,
life seemed normal.

He took me skating,
told me to turn my music down,
went to parent's night at school.

Until, the whispers started.

It threw me
a little off balance
to learn that
strangers never crossed him, or

He'd throw them in the river,
burn the house down, or
poison the dog.

I shook things off, didn't listen,
cause I knew the code.
Life is fine and school is good.

To even things out
I smoked a few joints
took a pill, or two.

It wasn't enough,
I needed to prove myself,

Picked a fight with a girl
who bullied me at school.
Held a garden spade above her
felt the coolness in my hand,

Then, let it fall

to the left of me on
the green, green ground.

I cried, and
crawled out of the hole.

I went to visit him in prison
the year I turned thirty-five.

Nothing looked familiar,
none of the old rules applied.

He was an old man needing forgiveness
before he died,

It was the right thing to do.

Flight School

Gone were carefree days
of catching fireflies

watching their lights
in glass jars

I was on the verge of something
could feel it in my pores

It was then I would call
on my best friend

I would climb the safe stairs
to her attic bedroom

We'd open the window
pray for a breeze and

Beat our wings
against the walls

When sleep finally found us
we glowed.

Furlough

After being sexually assaulted
by my father's 'friend,'
I had been running scared
for a while.

When I met a guy painting furniture
near the corner of Adams and Kyle.

He was a Veteran, had served
two tours in Vietnam.

We kept on talking,
and I followed him
to this little rundown apartment.

I drank white wine and
my cigarette smoke
wisped through the air.

What can I say,
we were there,
we were there.

His blue jean cuffs were flapping to
the tune of "Imagine," as he smiled
and strummed an old box guitar.

Life can take you far, or
just where you are, and
we hung up life's fatigue.

And, the moonglow
touched everything,

Because I said yes.

The Cross at Yellow Brick Road

VIII.

Mom lost all the kids by the time I turned eighteen.

She lived on and off the streets for the next ten years.

She was labeled Crazy Judy by the authorities.

I lived in a city two hours away, and brought her back to live with me when I was twenty-eight.

She was a drunk; I was clean and on my hilltop, pointing down to the weak one.

She made me birthday cakes and always called me Lisa Ann.

She made me breakfast and made my bed.

She did my laundry, mopped my floors, and brushed my hair.

She crocheted and filled my house with doiles.

When my hair caught fire, it was her body over mine that doused the flames.

With her social security check she bought me a new T.V., clothes for my kids, and paid my utilities.

She lived in homeless shelters, shopped at Free Clothes day, and ate at the mission.

I wanted a mother I could count on with a white picket fence.

The Shack

I had been searching the streets
of her hometown a few days.

Once I hit the downtown area,
bar patrons pointed me to the alley
frequented by local vagrants.

I almost turned away from
this woman with no teeth, fresh scars
on her chin, and dyed orange hair.

Only her eyes remained,
staring out cracked window panes.

Take my hand, my mother.

The Cross at Yellow Brick Road

VIII.

She hadn't owned a car in decades, so in the summer she brought
my children plastic swimming pools on buses.

In the winter, she brought swirling snow, baby dolls, chalkboards,
and balls with jacks.

She brought me flowers and a watch to my writer's award ceremony.

My children knew her well. They listened to her stories of the old days.

Her days, when a candy bar was a nickel, and if a boy loved you, he might
paint your name on his car.

She came to live with me one last time in '99.

She still cried when she watched "Bambi," blushed at 55, and wore a
head scarf.

She never spoke a racial slur, taught me never to steal, and always tipped
the waitress.

I didn't ask if she had one last wish.

I helped her out of the tub, once.

I did dishes, read books, and left with friends.

She reminded to button my coat, zip up my purse, and drive careful.

She walked to the store to bring me milk and toothache medicine.

The last supper she made me was Salisbury steak, fried potatoes, and green beans.

I didn't eat; I had somewhere to go.

I can see my youngest daughter climbing into my mother's bed, how she laid her head on Mom's chest.

ReCalling

I hear my granddaughter run out
to her best friend,

And, I am there with mine
on the abandoned porch of childhood.

Donning hats
for that far, faraway
someday.

I hear my mother calling,
a ribbon on a breeze
I gather
to wrap around me.

A time for Kool-Aid
and crust
of a peanut butter sandwich.

The clock
tic-toc—

Yet, laced
with—
Evergreen.

Dwelling

I went to the house
of memory
I folded it
thirty-four times

One fold
for each move
of my childhood

Like paper
I was flattened
by the weight
of it

When my mother died
I returned
to open it

The folds were gone
I ate it
to sustain me

Ode to Eternity

The dress was the lightest of tans
with a touch of pink flowers.

I waited on the knell of an hour
for help from my sisters
to dress my dead mother.

Not one for detail
yet, I have turned
a funeral home
into a beauty parlor.

It took the three of us
to drape the dress
over her head and
pull her arms through the sleeves.

Her brows had to be arched...just so,
a dab of blush for the cheeks, and
a faint lip color.

I held her head so
they could clasp her tiny cross necklace, and

We shared a bit of gossip
and laughed
having almost forgotten her undergarments.

I waved my sisters on
to handle the other tasks
at home.

Outside,
the birds sang,

The setting sun
kept time
to our last afternoon.

Then, I folded my Mother's hands.

I had done for her
what she had done for me
a thousand times.

Now, I see her face
when I get ready.

The Cross at Yellow Brick Road

Epilogue:

Later, when I was cleaning out her room, I found an old book.

She must have gotten it off my shelf.

It was about a daughter getting to know her mother while she was dying from cancer.

I always knew my mother.

I threw the book in the garbage.

The roses and cross from her casket are on my nightstand.

Mom and I run from the gravediggers, and do all the things a mother and daughter do.

Home

My grief has settled like dust.
I needed only to open this door
wide enough
to see my reflection.

VITA

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