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A Second Universe

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

A SECOND UNIVERSE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Emily Benson

2016

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by Emily Benson, and entitled A Second Universe, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Denise Duhamel

Bruce Harvey

Julie Marie Wade, Major Professor

Date of Defense: Tuesday, March 22, 2016

The thesis of Emily Benson is approved.

Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

Andrés G. Gil
Vice President for Research and Economic Development
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2016

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my incredible support system. First and foremost, to my husband, Caleb, who spent countless nights listening intently as I read drafts of the same stories aloud to him over and over, who sat on the floor with me mapping out the order of my essays, who talked me down from the ledges of the “I can’t do it” and the “It will never get done”. To my family who raised me in homes of spirituality, belief in ghosts and magic, a grounding love for nature, and most importantly a humor to laugh at that which we cannot change. To my mom who taught me about the things in life that are worth fighting for. To my brother who has been my best friend since day one. To my sister who taught me how precious and fragile life is. To my dad who taught me to see beauty everywhere I look. You all are the reason I have anything to write about at all. Lastly, but certainly not least, to my thesis director and constant cheerleader, Julie Marie Wade, without whom I’d have tossed all my writing in the trash a long time ago. Her motivation, encouragement, and incomprehensible way of making a writer like me believe in myself is truly something to be acknowledged. Thank you, all of you, a million times over.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

A SECOND UNIVERSE

by

Emily Benson

Florida International University, 2016

Miami, Florida

Professor Julie Marie Wade, Major Professor

A SECOND UNIVERSE is a memoir-in-essays that traces the author's coming of age and her pursuit of self-discovery, belonging, and healing in all its forms. The book opens in the past, diving into the lives of the author's parents before she was born and shedding light on the many obstacles they overcame to bring her earth-side. Set against the backdrop of the Southern Utah deserts and the clarity the author finds in the natural world, these essays wind through the author's different childhood homes, down the lonely and desolate road of a sister's addiction, and into the darkness that comes as she braces for her father's impending blindness. Similar to Brenda Miller's LISTENING AGAINST THE STONE, this collection explores the inherent desire for human connection and spiritual insight that we search for in the places we live, the people we love, and the nature that surrounds us.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
Prologue.....	1
The Narrows.....	6
Back to Basics.....	7
Artemisia Tridentada Tridentada.....	12
Life and Death on Fifth Avenue.....	20
Lost and Found.....	43
How to Snow Day.....	62
How to Mormon.....	65
There and Back Again.....	68
Bokeh.....	78
To Snap(shot).....	88
Bodhisatta.....	96
Moki Marbles and the Difference Between Eyesight and Seeing.....	104
A Second Universe.....	133
What Remains.....	137

Prologue

On September 12th, 1988 my parents brought me into the world in a small room at the University of Utah Medical Center with a view of the mountains that encased Salt Lake. On paper, my mom was dying. At the exact moment that she was bringing new life into the world, a vicious disease was coursing through her veins, ravaging her white blood cells, working diligently to end her life.

Several doctors waited in a semi-circle at her feet as she lie on her back, breathing through the contractions. Nurse after nurse fluttered in and out of the room checking heart rate monitors and oxygen levels, waiting for each to plummet, waiting for the inevitable devastation that their textbooks told them was ahead. Numerous med students lined the walls of the room scribbling on clipboards and chatting quietly behind their hands. The room buzzed with white noise and pulsed steadily like one body as everyone anticipated the first live birth on record to someone diagnosed with Churg Strauss Syndrome.

“It’s time to push.” The main doctor said to my mom, his hands cradled between her knees, open and ready to receive my little body. My mom and dad – the entire room collectively – held their breath.

One year before this moment, my dad is setting up a small tent at the Calf Creek Campground in Southern Utah. It’s a crisp and clear forty-seven degrees, and he and my mom and my brother, only four-years-old at the time, have claimed a site on the edge of the park. With only thirteen sites in total, it’s one of the smallest campgrounds they’ve

visited, remote and removed from any civilization by over eighty miles and nearly a two-hour drive.

Less than a year before, my parents sat in a doctor's office and absorbed the news of my mom's diagnosis and her prognosis of approximately six months to live. Every day that followed was a gift, and my mom knew this. She started running in the mornings and was up to nearly six miles a day. She woke when it was dark, laced her shoes, and snuck out the door. If the disease was going to kill her, it was going to have to catch her first.

As my dad put the tent together, showing Tyler how to align the skinny metal poles, how to lock them into place with the fabric stretched across them, my mom took off for a jog through the canyon. She breathed heavily through the thick scarf wrapped around her face, the icy air freezing her throat and searing her chest cavity like the flames of the campfire. She made it about a mile and a half down a red-clay path when she realized something was wrong.

She slowed to walk, then stopped between walls of redrock that reached hundreds of feet into the clear sky. She couldn't catch her breath. Leaning her head back, her face towards the heavens, she yanked the scarf from her face attempting to gulp in the oxygen that swirled around her. The earth began to spin. She pulled out the inhaler zipped into her coat pocket and pumped the medicine into her mouth one, two, three times. Nothing. *Run*, she heard whispered from desert voices all around her – the clear stream trickling over smooth stones, the startling green yucca that swayed in the soft canyon breeze – and she took off towards her boys.

By the time she made it to their site, the skin under her fingernails was turning blue. She collapsed on the ground in front of my dad and Ty, flat on her back with cold tears

running down her face and onto the packed dirt. My dad jumped to his feet and darted to the tent for their first aid kit, recognizing what was happening as the many warning signs of respiratory arrest. He knew that inside the white plastic box in the pocket of the tent they had three ampules of epinephrine and only minutes to get them into my mom's system before it was too late.

He hovered over her limp body, her breathing loud and strained, and filled the first syringe. My mom stared into his eyes as he pulled her skinny arm from her jacket and held it in his hand the way the doctors had shown him. He plunged the needle into the soft flesh of her upper arm and waited. Nothing. He filled the second syringe and stuck her again. Nothing. Tears streamed down her face now, her blonde hair fanned out beneath her on the dirt. Ty kneeled next to her and put his tiny hands on her chest. My dad filled the third syringe, pleading aloud, *please, please, please*, and buried the needle, again, into her skin. Nothing. He dropped her arm helplessly and ran into the gravel street that made up the loop that the campsites branched off of.

“Help! Please! Anyone! My wife can't breathe! She's *dying!*” He screamed at the top of his lungs and turned to scoop her into the car as a woman came running from a site several lots down, a green oxygen tank bouncing over the gravel behind her.

Of the thirteen sites at the campground, only two had been reserved for that weekend. The other couple had made a last-minute decision to get away for a couple nights and almost changed their minds as the weatherman showed the temperatures dropping. But they'd already paid for the site so they packed their car with the heavy oxygen tank in the back – a requirement for the husband's sleep apnea – and were setting up their own tent when they heard my dad's cries for help.

With the man's help, my dad got my mom and brother into the car and the woman sat in the back, holding the oxygen mask to my mom's face as they sped toward the closest hospital, an hour and a half away. They pulled into the parking lot as my mom's heart rate was slowing, each breath further and further apart. When they finally got her in front of the doctor in the emergency room, where she was ultimately given a stronger shot of epinephrine that sped throughout her body and eventually worked, he stood to the side of her bed and took her hand in his.

"Wendy," he said, "when you arrived, your tests showed the lowest level of oxygen I have ever seen in a living person." Her eyes widened. "By all logic, by all medical facts, you should be dead." He looked around her to my dad sitting in the corner, bouncing Ty on his lap, and back into my mom's eyes. "You, all three of you, certainly have someone watching over you."

In the moments after I arrive earth-side, the doctors whisk me away, wrapped in a thin blanket and crying. They assume that I'll need immediate medical attention, that I'll have deformities, internal complications, life-threatening issues in the earliest moments of my existence. They scrub my little body clean, gently rub my raw skin under warm water. They check every inch, prick my tiny finger for immediate blood tests, perform all scans available to diagnose this five pound premie with the afflictions I must surely have. Yet, they find nothing. By all accounts, I am as healthy as physically possible.

After what feels like days, the nurse finally places me in my mom's outstretched arms where we lock eyes for the first time yet recognize each other immediately. My dad

breathes heavily over her shoulder, crying silently and leaning forward to kiss the top of my head.

Ty climbs into the hospital bed and nuzzles against my mom where he places his hands on her warm chest and feels her steady breathing.

This book tells a story of healing. It chronicles my life and the lives of those around me, depicting the pain, the struggle, and the beauty of transformation in all of its forms. We learn of a deadly disease that plagues my mom's body, that fights to take her from our family, and that ultimately is healed by her union with my dad. We walk the long and barren road of addiction that sucks the life from my sister; that leads to years of my own painful recovery through counseling and meditation, through acceptance of what we cannot change. We watch as my dad slowly loses his sight, as I search for a cure in the desert and find an answer in the stars. We find, time and time again, that Mother Nature is the ultimate physician – physically, mentally, emotionally. Through death and loss – of people, homes, even stuffed koala bears – and the deep yearning to belong in a community with others, we find a restorative path. This book strives to demonstrate that though it may be a long journey, it is also a beautiful one.