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# Mothers of Sparta

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

MOTHERS OF SPARTA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Dawn Davies Tyrrell

2015

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

This thesis, written by Dawn Davies Tyrrell, and entitled Mothers of Sparta, 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.

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John Dufresne

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Vernon Dickson

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Julie Marie Wade, Major Professor

Date of Defense: February 23, 2015

The thesis of Mothers of Sparta is approved.

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Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts and Sciences

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Dean Lakshmi N. Reddi  
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2015

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

MOTHERS OF SPARTA

by

Dawn Davies Tyrrell

Florida International University, 2015

Miami, Florida

Professor Julie Marie Wade, Major Professor

*Mothers of Sparta* is a collection of thirteen personal essays that examine place—knowing one’s place, and finding one’s place in the world. The narrative arc chronicles the narrator’s childhood, young adulthood, marriage and child rearing years, ultimately encompassing the difficulties of raising a child who, due to brain damage, faces an uncertain future.

As the narrator grows older, place shifts from a concrete knowledge of the physical world around her, to learning her place within gendered and regional social constructs, and defining her place through roles such as wife, mother, student and writer.

These essays are diverse in style. Woven throughout is a theme of violence, weighted with visceral language: the violence of accident and death, the violence that occurs in nature and in domestic spaces, and the violence that often goes unnoticed because we live in a violent world.

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## Three Places

Here's one: it's the woods behind a townhouse complex in northeast Virginia. You can call to mind everything—the thick trees, the rolling hills, the galloping creek that is so large across the widest part that it secretly thinks it might be a river, and it gets cocky like that, prancing around, showing some whitewater, making you want to strip down to your undershirt and day-of-the-week panties and jump in. You are not allowed to swim the creek but you do, and you fib to your parents about this, because you know nothing will make you stop, even on that one day you are up to your ribs, breathless from the smack of the cold on your skin, and you see the copperhead swimming straight for the center of your chest.

The water is surrounded by high, rocky ledges that crumble when you step on them, and you find silver veins of clay when you dig in just the right places. You use this clay to make thumb pots that crack when you dry them in the sun. You climb the ledges and explore the necklace of wet caves with a cautious excitement, because in the depths could be a sleeping colony of bats that might dive straight for your face and suck out all of your blood, or a bear waiting to tear you up, or a hobo who pops out and tries to roast you on a spit. You shiver when you see that the caves are empty, and you clap and make small, shrill chirps in various directions to test out the dark echo. You sit down and feel the absence of warmth and light, and the dripping silence, and dare yourself to stay as long as you can, which is less than two minutes, because your imagination is fruitful, and the thought of bats and bears and hobos makes it feel like something is crawling up your

spine and into your brain. You panic and hurl yourself back down the ledges, skidding on your tailbone, grateful that you have cheated death again.

The rocky terrain leads up into a wide field, and beyond that, a flat pine-bottom woods where the carpet of needles is so fragrant and tangy that you cannot resist the urge to take off your shoes and run it barefoot. All of your free time is spent outside, in this place, scrounging wood for your tree house and damming the creek during dry spells, climbing the rocks, and stalking deer, small, placid, white-tailed things that toy with you. It is your dream to catch one and keep it as a pet. This is your childhood. It is wonderful. Don't deny it simply because things changed. Don't be bitter like that.

During the school year, you ride the bus to a friendly experimental school that allows you to work ahead in the self-governed learning packets that are all the rage. You are clever and you know it, and it sets you apart. Each semester you race through your packets, finishing months ahead of everyone else, with the singular goal of spending as much time as possible in the reading corner, sprawled out in a beanbag, gobbling up novels and fairy tales. The lunch ladies serve grits with cheese and ham steaks on Wednesdays and this is your favorite food, so you buy school lunch on this day only, tucking two quarters into the pointed corner seam of your jumper pocket. The teachers are kind. They trust you to run small errands and go to the toilet without a buddy. They tease their hair big and wear polyester dresses, and their thick, nylon-clad thighs rub together when they walk. You adore them. They call you Doll-Baby, or Honey Pot, and tell you that you are clever. You bat your eyes right back at them, don't you? You are such a little pet.

Picture your small hand, sliding into an icy, clear stream, in the direction of the slant of the shadows. You are creeping up on the neck of a crawdaddy, carefully, almost surgically in precision, aiming for the place behind his neck where you know his eyeballs can't register. You nab him before he knows what hit him, leaving behind an empty swirl of mud and decaying leaves in the pocket of brown rocks where he once rested. Your coat sleeve is wet to the elbow and cold, but you hand him, perfect, startled, blue as lapis, to your friend Danielle who puts him in a mason jar full of creek water. Danielle's crooked front teeth make her look like she belongs on the short school bus, but this is not true. She is clever and bold and reckless and liberated from the desire to please the grown-ups in her life, and you adore her for this. Indeed, six weeks before, you became blood sisters, the way ten-year-olds are supposed to, behind the Slocum's aluminum shed, using a needle she goaded you to liberate from your mother's sewing kit which you are never supposed to touch. This is not the first glimpse of the rascal in you, and you know it. First the swimming and the fibbing and now this, but no matter—on this day your general love for life causes a tickling in your body that can only be alleviated by tearing across a wide field until your legs and lungs burn.

When the sun starts to shine sideways and your hands are stiff with cold, you head home, exhausted and dirty, your stomach empty and gnarling. You smell the beginning of the fire in your neighbor's fireplace, a crisp, sharp, empty smell that reminds you that you do not want to be alone outside after the sun goes down. There could be bats and bears and hobos, after all. You see the light in your living room window, and it warms you, and you think about spaghetti and meatballs and *Charlie's Angels*, and a hot bath and your twin bed with the yellow gingham pillowcase and matching curtains. You burst into the

house and stop short because your parents are sitting at the dining room table, waiting for you with a cautious look on their faces. *Dagnabbit*, you think, because you know what's about to happen. You have been through this before, five times, in fact, and had hoped to be done with it. "We have some exciting news," they start, but you already know by the looks on their faces, the hopeful, falsely confident perk of the eyebrows, the folded hands, exactly what they are going to say. "Daddy got a promotion," your mother starts, but you already know what this means: you are moving again. You should have known. Your happiness should have told you. As soon as you get used to the things in a place, as soon as you find your footing, as soon as you give yourself permission to like it, it is time to go.

"We just got here," you say. "It feels like we just got here."

"Don't worry," they tell you. "You'll love New York. We promise."

You drive until you are two hours from the Canadian border, so far north that you expect to see sled dogs. Your heart is bitter. You feel what hate is like, not the hating of people, per se, but the hating of impotence. The hating that comes when you can't do anything to stop anything from happening. You let this bitterness and hatred take over a part of you, even though Sunday School has taught you about forgiveness and people doing the best they can with what they have.

You do not want to be here. You dislike cold and New York is the coldest place you have ever been. People talk differently and everyone is white, but the house is bigger than your old one in Virginia. You note the wall-to-wall carpeting and the fireplace in the

family room, which the real estate agent calls the “den,” and the quarter-acre yard. There is also a pine tree that has a natural saddle where you can read a Trixie Belden mystery, and a stone fence that houses an elusive chipmunk, but none of it matters. You are the new girl again.

You develop coping skills for this, thoughtful self-talk that reminds you that you are okay, that this too will pass, but these skills do not always help you feel better, so almost unconsciously, you include in your social repertoire protective actions, such as looking deferentially away from people when they speak to you, not raising your hand in class, not sitting in the middle or the back of the school bus, and not volunteering anything out loud, ever, lest they call you a hillbilly in front of the cute Irish boy, Kelly Moynihan, who gives you the sympathetic eyebrow in the lunch line. Your caution has erased most of your public self. In Virginia, you were an eye-batting Southern girl, and now you must become something else. Your confidence has been washed again, in hot water with bluing, and you are now a clean, pale, cloth doll. You have yet to figure out what kind of personality you must develop to make people like you in this part of the country. With every move, it becomes more of a puzzle.

This school is different, you discover. Teachers are gruff and harried and unsympathetic and when you complain about it to your mother, she says, “It’s just how they are up here,” but this does not make you feel better. She misses her friends, too, she says, as if this is supposed to make you feel better, but all you think is, *shut up*, because if it were up to you, you would be watching cartoons with Danielle back in Virginia, and fibbing about swimming in the creek, so don’t tell you about wishing things could be the way they were.