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Ambient Light: Essays on Marriage, Motherhood, and Mental Health

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

AMBIENT LIGHT: ESSAYS ON MARRIAGE, MOTHERHOOD, AND MENTAL
HEALTH

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

By

Bonnie Losak

2018

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

This thesis, written by Bonnie Losak, and entitled, Ambient Light: Essays on Marriage, Motherhood, and Mental Health, 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.

John Dufresne

Maneck Daruwala

Julie Marie Wade, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 20, 2018

The thesis of Bonnie Losak is approved.

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

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

Florida International University, 2018

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DEDICATION

For my three children, whose lives fill these pages, and who fill my life with joy.

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Thanks to my niece, Lisa Beth, who was always one of my first readers and most ardent supporters.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

AMBIENT LIGHT: ESSAYS ON MARRIAGE, MOTHERHOOD, AND MENTAL
HEALTH

by

Bonnie Losak

Florida International University, 2018

Miami, Florida

Professor Julie Wade, Major Professor

AMBIENT LIGHT: ESSAYS ON MARRIAGE, MOTHERHOOD, AND MENTAL HEALTH is a collection of ten personal and lyric essays interspersed with poems that speak to the subject or tone of the essay that follows. These essays examine the narrator's experiences as mother, wife, and daughter, and explore the manner in which the different roles bleed into one another. The narrator's impending divorce and the events that coalesce around it shape these essays into a coherent whole.

In the spirit of Brenda Miller's lyric essays, the essays collected in AMBIENT LIGHT: ESSAYS ON MARRIAGE, MOTHERHOOD, AND MENTAL HEALTH, use rich, imagistic language to tell of places and times both reflective and speculative in nature. They speak to the all-too-common dilemma of balancing motherhood with a demanding professional life, while also considering less ordinary issues, such as one child's mental health challenges and another's run-ins with the law.

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Vestiges of White

(after Spanish Trilogy)

From the heat, look! that rises in visible waves
just above the pavement—(and from you)
from storefront windows lined with *papier mache*
masks heavy with paint and despair (and from you)
from the whistle of a distant train lurching
toward an unfamiliar station (and from you)
from you and from all you have stolen to forge
this illusion; from the slack breathing
of white pines that skirt an unfinished structure
set at the edge of town, not yet a farmhouse or a silo—
from you and from every fire smoldering
near an unsuspecting forest, planted with red oak
and dotted with false acacias; from the very flesh
you shaped to fashion this illusion, this lie, this void,
from foreign scents and pianos thick with dust,
from young women peddling trinkets on wet sidewalks,
women with coiled hair and skirts they rarely change,
from watercolors that hang in abandoned hotels,
from so much that is lost and from you,

there lingers just this: a shifting space
of ambient light.

Genuflecting to the Sun

It's Christmas night, 2013 and my older daughter, Tessa, and I are sitting on our front porch in a pair of Adirondack chairs her dad and I purchased more than two decades earlier with Green Stamps that were doled out by a local supermarket as a loyalty incentive. The left leg of my chair is wobbly. Paint is peeling from its armrests. By this time next year it will have been hauled to the side of the street and lain in repose on one side, soon to be collected by the City of Miami Beach Waste Department, and carted off to the dump.

I imagine my rickety chair heaped alongside beach umbrellas that no longer provide shade and living room sofas with exposed springs. Maybe the chair will be sought out and probed by a man whose pregnant wife would like to sit on their small balcony in the evenings. She is no longer comfortable leaning on the railing when the two seek refuge from the heat on the unadorned slab of cement that juts out from their third-floor apartment. The man examines the discarded chair, jostles the wood with his calloused hands. He can fix it, he decides, make it sturdy again. Maybe he'll even bring the chair inside once the baby comes. His wife can use the wide chair to nurse the infant, he thinks. He smiles to himself, imagining her with their child, resting in the newly refurbished chair in front of a whirring box fan they cannot yet afford to buy.

It's late and our neighborhood, a modest, mad-made island less than a mile and one-half from the beach, should be peaceful. And it is, sort of. There's no tch tch tch of outboard engines pattering back from a day at the sandbar, no

pop band serenading an all-night party to which we haven't been invited, no kids yelping in back-yard pools.

Even on our covered front porch, Tessa and I speak in whispers. This is despite the fact that whispering is wholly unnecessary because inside our melon-colored two story home, Tessa's father, my husband, is screaming. At me. I've come outside to escape his fury. Tessa has followed me to provide comfort or more likely, because she also feels the need to flee. Enrique is drunk— again. Is it any different from last time?

Tessa, and her sister too, know to approach the house cautiously on Friday evenings. If the stereo is audible from inside the car, they don't go to the front door. Instead, the three of us will arrange to take dinner at Shucker's, or maybe the Chinese buffet. Afterward we might go to an outdoor mall where we'll coo at babies in strollers, ball gown-style dresses in store windows, and other people's dogs. If we're lucky, by the time we get home, Enrique will be asleep on the couch, or at least subdued. Maybe the liquor is no longer coursing through his system, his eyes no longer glazed over. If the music is still blaring, it means he's still drunk. What is it with loud music and drinking anyway? Someone goes to the computer. Maybe alcohol causes a temporary hearing loss, she says.

Was this December outburst any different from last time? I consider. The drunken rages have been going on for so many years, I've lost count. Enrique often doesn't remember the extent of his rampage by the next morning. He wakes up apologetic. He washes dishes, brings flowers. But it's no use. My eyes

are streaked red with exhaustion, and I am unable to either forget or forgive the insults he can't remember making.

"Mom," Tessa says.

I don't respond. Am I crying? I can't remember. The wind picks up, and a browning palm frond threatens to break free from the tree that has spawned it. Later, when it hits the front lawn with a thwack, I startle, but Tessa just laughs.

I study Tessa's profile. She has cropped her hair to chin-length. It's the color of chocolate ice cream just scooped into a cone. In high school she dyed it green, then blue. Once, maybe her sophomore year in college, she completely shaved it off. It was a statement. I'm pretty sure it was intended to announce in bold script, "I am a lesbian. Do you get it now?"

Some did. Others pretended they didn't. I think they're pretending still.

Tessa interrupts my thoughts that spin in circles and then get stuck, like car tires in the rising tide at Crescent Beach.

"Why don't the two of you just get divorced already?" Tessa asks, her tone solemn, demanding.

Now I'm definitely crying, tears mottling uneven lines onto blush-contoured cheeks, sobs working their way into rasping coughs that are released from somewhere beyond my mouth. My body shakes with a sound created outside of thoughts and sanity, a place distant from flesh and body.