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THISNESS: OR, 100 PACES

A Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of requirements

for the Master of Fine Arts

in the Department of English

The University of Mississippi

by

HENRY WISE

April 2015

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ABSTRACT

This is a series of poems which explore the unnamed American narrator's search for identity while living in Taiwan. In these poems, he considers the political situation of Taiwan. This work is meant to contemplate the continuousness of life, the futility of love, the complications of language, the power of the world's elements, and the essence of what exactly life is all about.

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 inverted textures a parallel of possibilities
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the moon the tombs the hillside flowing black
the high grass is a nest around them down
runoff to the dead coral reef the ghost water a knife
sharpening sharpening always against the point always

this the old land the old sea the ancestors
headhunters once Christians now buried
like seeds

all of it rooted here obstinate as the sea
the sea a royal toil of blood pulsing against the land
leaning into mountain and the hazed musty ground the cliffs vertical and ending
in cloud holding echoes
trapping breath pulsing like hot life
from an old timeless time

the freighter the illusion of stillness
on the horizon its smoke becomes cloud

this is a spot check
we know a place the wind will be offshore
by the way it now passes through the indicator
the flag of the Republic and there is swell
lines of it approaching from the SE dissipating over
the tetrapods

by noon we know the wind will have changed
we say all this not talking looking
through our visors starting our engines again
leaving this corpse of the nightmarket boarded up
for the day

Champion's shirt flickers behind him
like a fire
like a wake

feet toughened walking up and down breakwaters
and over driftwood trees and rocks and debris
parts of wrecked fiberglass hulls

scraps of rusty metal
over anything

anything
for waves

standing off the point at Immortals that dead coral talonous
reef you bent into an elder pain flaring through
your soles there the rock protruding

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heavy in the grove
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his name was Cola he was my friend

his back was mapped in blood almost in the shape almost in the
characters
of his name his own blood runoff from his skin
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time the wavelength the movement
of vipers of the baibushe

(one hundred pacer)

lurking in the nightshadows its long hooked fangs
that give you the warmth of
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if you see it not to attack it
for its diamond skin beaked nose spear-
head for the local tribes is sacred
 the reincarnation of ancestors

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and when he feels it that
spirit that love that urge that pull
he brings the spiked bat hard against his own
skull bleeds for Mazu goddess of the sea
with a shadow for a face

an ancient version of the ocean flows
down his back

crosses black against
the moon the tombs the hillside flowing black
the high grass is a nest around them down
runoff to the dead coral reef the ghost water a knife
sharpening sharpening always against the point always

this the old land the old sea the ancestors
headhunters once Christians now buried
like seeds

all of it rooted here obstinate as the sea
the sea a royal toil of blood pulsing against the land
leaning into mountain and the hazed musty ground the cliffs vertical and ending
in cloud holding echoes
trapping breath pulsing like hot life
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the freighter the illusion of stillness
on the horizon its smoke becomes cloud

this is a spot check
we know a place the wind will be offshore
by the way it now passes through the indicator
the flag of the Republic and there is swell
lines of it approaching from the SE dissipating over
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by noon we know the wind will have changed
we say all this not talking looking
through our visors starting our engines again
leaving this corpse of the nightmarket boarded up
for the day

Champion's shirt flickers behind him
like a fire
like a wake

feet toughened walking up and down breakwaters
and over driftwood trees and rocks and debris
parts of wrecked fiberglass hulls
scraps of rusty metal
over anything
anything
for waves

standing off the point at Immortals that dead coral talonous
reef you bent into an elder pain flaring through
your soles there the rock protruding

detached mount-shaped spume shattered white
an exit wound

low tide a low barnacled bridge connects it
and out there in the winds of the low the inflections
of a tongue I know but cannot comprehend
white gulls on the water caught in the gales
the ripening mango of the
dusk a glowing dust gritty pixels clean
knowing the storm will come
bend palm trees into bows catapulting coconuts thudding
heavy in the grove
I have come back back to this place

this place yes where the reef sticks out out there
where they found the rags of his bright shorts the fisherman
saying he'd seen him naked board washed up white as a foreigner
tinny as old bone rattling across the reef of tusks and viper's teeth
saying he'd seen it sure

as night comes every day

his name was Cola he was my friend

his back was mapped in blood almost in the shape almost in the
characters
of his name his own blood runoff from his skin
running back into sea back again back again

time the wavelength the movement
of vipers of the baibushe

(one hundred pacer)
lurking in the nightshadows its long hooked fangs
that give you the warmth of
hemorrhaging of brimming but better
if you see it not to attack it

for its diamond skin beaked nose spear-
head for the local tribes is sacred
the reincarnation of ancestors

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to be modern to be Western to be remembered in black
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to have so many portraits in so many homes in every school
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I must imagine all
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more true a sickness of freedom

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all we have are waves before and after

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taller than the mountains
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look out see the Pacific marching against the sky
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under the wild shade I dream
she waits the leaves are a puzzle
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I have come back back to this place

this place yes where the reef sticks out out there
where they found the rags of his bright shorts the fisherman
saying he'd seen him naked board washed up white as a foreigner
tinny as old bone rattling across the reef of tusks and viper's teeth
saying he'd seen it sure

as night comes every day

his name was Cola he was my friend

his back was mapped in blood almost in the shape almost in the
characters
of his name his own blood runoff from his skin
running back into sea back again back again

time the wavelength the movement
of vipers of the baibushe
(one hundred pacer)
lurking in the nightshadows its long hooked fangs
that give you the warmth of
hemorrhaging of brimming but better
if you see it not to attack it

for its diamond skin beaked nose spear-
head for the local tribes is sacred
the reincarnation of ancestors

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looking through the smoky cold as if there is something
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something spinning out from the center
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taller than the mountains
deeper than the trench

look out see the Pacific marching against the sky
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so different from the old

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spread like shadows across his back
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from laborers' trucks clunking like stones shifting
in a large swell clattering that rhythm that noise
and when he feels it that
spirit that love that urge that pull
he brings the spiked bat hard against his own
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an ancient version of the ocean flows
down his back

crosses black against
the moon the tombs the hillside flowing black
the high grass is a nest around them down
runoff to the dead coral reef the ghost water a knife
sharpening sharpening always against the point always

this the old land the old sea the ancestors
headhunters once Christians now buried
like seeds

all of it rooted here obstinate as the sea
the sea a royal toil of blood pulsing against the land
leaning into mountain and the hazed musty ground the cliffs vertical and ending
in cloud holding echoes
trapping breath pulsing like hot life
from an old timeless time

the freighter the illusion of stillness
on the horizon its smoke becomes cloud

this is a spot check
we know a place the wind will be offshore
by the way it now passes through the indicator
the flag of the Republic and there is swell
lines of it approaching from the SE dissipating over
the tetrapods

by noon we know the wind will have changed
we say all this not talking looking
through our visors starting our engines again
leaving this corpse of the nightmarket boarded up
for the day

Champion's shirt flickers behind him
like a fire
like a wake

feet toughened walking up and down breakwaters
and over driftwood trees and rocks and debris
parts of wrecked fiberglass hulls
scraps of rusty metal
over anything
anything
for waves

standing off the point at Immortals that dead coral talonous
reef you bent into an elder pain flaring through
your soles there the rock protruding

detached mount-shaped spume shattered white
an exit wound

low tide a low barnacled bridge connects it
and out there in the winds of the low the inflections
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inverted textures a parallel of possibilities
does it have to be this? does a question
precede an answer? this not this
impermanence all you can have is your momentum
for whether you stand like a tree or wander
like a dog this becomes that becomes this

in this violent trance the young man tattoos
spread like shadows across his back
eyes closed not here not here the drums
from laborers' trucks clunking like stones shifting
in a large swell clattering that rhythm that noise
and when he feels it that
spirit that love that urge that pull
he brings the spiked bat hard against his own
skull bleeds for Mazu goddess of the sea
with a shadow for a face

an ancient version of the ocean flows
down his back

crosses black against
the moon the tombs the hillside flowing black
the high grass is a nest around them down
runoff to the dead coral reef the ghost water a knife
sharpening sharpening always against the point always

this the old land the old sea the ancestors
headhunters once Christians now buried
like seeds

all of it rooted here obstinate as the sea
the sea a royal toil of blood pulsing against the land
leaning into mountain and the hazed musty ground the cliffs vertical and ending
in cloud holding echoes
trapping breath pulsing like hot life
from an old timeless time

the freighter the illusion of stillness
on the horizon its smoke becomes cloud

this is a spot check
we know a place the wind will be offshore
by the way it now passes through the indicator
the flag of the Republic and there is swell
lines of it approaching from the SE dissipating over
the tetrapods

by noon we know the wind will have changed
we say all this not talking looking
through our visors starting our engines again
leaving this corpse of the nightmarket boarded up
for the day

Champion's shirt flickers behind him
like a fire
like a wake

feet toughened walking up and down breakwaters
and over driftwood trees and rocks and debris
parts of wrecked fiberglass hulls
scraps of rusty metal
over anything
anything
for waves

standing off the point at Immortals that dead coral talonous
reef you bent into an elder pain flaring through
your soles there the rock protruding

detached mount-shaped spume shattered white
an exit wound

low tide a low barnacled bridge connects it
and out there in the winds of the low the inflections
of a tongue I know but cannot comprehend
white gulls on the water caught in the gales
the ripening mango of the
dusk a glowing dust gritty pixels clean
knowing the storm will come
bend palm trees into bows catapulting coconuts thudding
heavy in the grove
I have come back back to this place

this place yes where the reef sticks out out there
where they found the rags of his bright shorts the fisherman
saying he'd seen him naked board washed up white as a foreigner
tinny as old bone rattling across the reef of tusks and viper's teeth
saying he'd seen it sure

as night comes every day

his name was Cola he was my friend

his back was mapped in blood almost in the shape almost in the
characters
of his name his own blood runoff from his skin
running back into sea back again back again

time the wavelength the movement
of vipers of the baibushe
(one hundred pacer)
lurking in the nightshadows its long hooked fangs
that give you the warmth of
hemorrhaging of brimming but better
if you see it not to attack it

for its diamond skin beaked nose spear-
head for the local tribes is sacred
the reincarnation of ancestors

Sun Yat-sen father of the Republic led others
of the Qing Dynasty to leave their traditions
leave their robes for suits and overcoats to be
to be modern to be Western to be remembered in black
and white is to live beyond life to cheat death
to have so many portraits in so many homes in every school
to be immortal
I must imagine all
I cannot know his voice his fears how many tries
it took to get the image right

looking through the smoky cold as if there is something
more true a sickness of freedom

something spinning out from the center
all we have are waves before and after

there is something big vast here
taller than the mountains
deeper than the trench

look out see the Pacific marching against the sky
earthquakes change solid to liquid

the locals say ghosts haunt the water
I must wonder if they see things
I can't
because I am foreign
of nothing here

under the wild shade I dream
she waits the leaves are a puzzle
not fitting together
slicing the light from the main street

Zhong Shan Lu (Chiang Kai-shek Road)

where vendors have filled in the night shift
in front of the closed metal gates of shops
this is a new generation
so different from the old

shifting nebulous variations
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VITA

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EDUCATION

M.F.A. in Creative Writing, University of Mississippi, May 2015
Thesis: THISNESS: OR, 100 PACES

B.A., Virginia Military Institute, Lexington, Virginia, 2001 – 2005
Major: English; *Minor:* Writing

Summer Study, St. Anne's College, University of Oxford, England, 2004
Student of English Renaissance Literature and History

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Instructor of Fiction, University of Mississippi, Fall 2014

Instructor of Creative Writing, University of Mississippi, Summer 2013, Spring 2015

Teaching Assistant, University of Mississippi, Fall 2012 – Spring 2014
Pre-1800 British Literature (1 semester)
Post-1800 British Literature (1 semester)
Post-1865 American Literature (2 semesters)

English Teacher, Szu Wei High School, Hualien, Taiwan, Fall 2010 – Summer 2012

Freelance English teacher, assessment writer and editor, Hualien, Taiwan, Fall 2010 – Summer 2012

English Teacher (Middle and Upper Schools) and Basketball Coach, North Cross School, Roanoke, Virginia, Summer 2007– Summer 2010

English Instructor, Republic of China Military Academy (ROCMA), Kaohsiung, Taiwan, Summer 2005 to Winter 2006

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS AND EDITORIAL WORK

Book Review, “Altamaha,” *Studies in American Culture*, Fall 2013

Reader, *Yalobusha Review*, Fall 2012- Spring 2013

Poems “Lunch Break,” “Impact,” “Something I’ve Been Holding Back,” and “By Motorbike to Baxiandong,” *Tau Creative Journal*, 2012.

Poem “Twelve Drops,” *Studies in American Culture*, 34.4, Fall 2011

Poems “Lief the Lucky” and “Brother,” *Shenandoah: The Washington and Lee Review*, 56.3, Winter 2006-2007

Editor-in-Chief, *The Sounding Brass*, VMI’s student literary magazine, Fall 2003 – Spring 2005

Member, VMI Publications Board, Fall 2003 – Spring 2005

Staff Writer, *The Cadet*, VMI’s student newspaper, 2001 – 2002; 2004

SELECTED HONORS AND AWARDS

Poem “Lunch Break” chosen as “the Best Literary Piece from the Global Community” by *Tau Creative Journal*, 2012

Recipient of John E. Woodward, VMI Class of 1923, Graduate Scholarship, 2012-present

Jordan/Witt Scholarship, VMI, 2001 – 2005

Robert H. Patterson, Jr. Scholarship, VMI, 2001 – 2005

Undercoffer Award for Fiction, VMI – 1st Place, 2004

Dr. Mary W. Balazs Scholarship in English, VMI, 2004 – 2005

Burress International Scholarship, VMI, 2004

Mark Wilson Memorial Scholarship, VMI, 2001 - 2002