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The Impetus is Forward Motion

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

THE IMPETUS IS FORWARD MOTION

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Sarah Mason

2015

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

This thesis, written by Sarah Mason, and entitled *The Impetus is Forward Motion*, 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.

Lester Standiford

Bruce Harvey

John Dufresne, Major Professor

Date of Defense: October 16, 2015

The thesis of Sarah Mason is approved.

Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts and Sciences

Dean Lakshmi N. Reddi
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2015

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS
THE IMPETUS IS FORWARD MOTION

by

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Florida International University, 2015

Miami, Florida

Professor John Dufresne, Major Professor

THE IMPETUS IS FORWARD MOTION is a book of personal essays about the author's childhood, teenage years, and beginning of adult life. The essays explore the themes of relocation, family, pets, art, and education with a focus on revealing what it means to be female in the modern world. The essays serve as an emotional description of a coming-of-age period of a member of the boomerang generation.

The collection is more or less in reverse chronological order and begins with a recent account of a very long drive and ends with a familial truth that had remained a secret for a long time. The events and people in the essays are those who impacted the author's life a great deal, in negative and positive ways.

Half of the essays are written as lyric essays, after John D'Agata and Anne Carson. The style of writing and subject matter for the other half of the essays was partially inspired by the straightforward, conversational tone of contemporary essay collections *Bad Feminist*, by Roxane Gay and *Not that Kind of Girl*, by Lena Dunham. In her essays, the author strives to not be like Sloane Crosley.

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Introduction & Acknowledgments

I think people should calm down and smell everything, not just roses. Even the bad stuff, as long as you don't get it on your nose. I think we are not present enough as a society. I think we need to listen harder to what children have to say. I think we need to teach our children how to think, not just how to do. I think cynicism is outdated, unless it is regarding standardized testing and, obviously, politicians. I'm tired of liars and people with something to prove. I think niceness is one of the hardest traits to achieve, and so is genuineness. I think it is very hard to be truthful and that is a big reason why we hurt one another all the time and fail to take care of ourselves.

This book is in reverse chronological order, for the most part. That's because we figure out how to do things in chronological order and then we figure out what it meant in reverse chronological order, if we ever figure out the latter.

I wrote much of this while watching two sixteen-pound cats cat around in my periphery and occasionally fight with one another. Whoever thinks cats are evil geniuses is wrong. I once watched Obi Wan fall off the couch because he tried to chew on his back foot and missed, and Elayne is deathly afraid of the lint roller.

I had the pleasure of falling in love while I wrote this. (Hi, Christopher!) I highly recommend it. It was during the falling in love process that I learned to be nice and genuine and truthful.

I miss my parents (Amy and Hob) and brothers (Jeremy and Adam) every day and I feel it in my chest muscles like it's my first day of school ever, even though I am almost thirty and they are only one-hundred fifty miles away. I'll never get used to this.

The Impetus is Forward Motion

“Home is where you feel at home. I’m still looking.”

–Truman Capote, *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*

The End of the Earth

The first time I ever drove on Florida’s I-95, I drove it all the way to the end. It was amazing, really. I had lived near the middle of I-95 all my life (southern Maryland beaches and Philadelphia), taking the road up and down and up and down to who knows where, and then there I was in bright south Florida, unable to go any farther.

The fleeting thought that I had reached the end of the Earth was, I knew, silly, but also convincing for me, who’d never been in this tropical wonderland. The road just appears to stop and fall off of the Earth and there is a moment, hands on the wheel and foot on the pedal, during which you really can’t see what your options are for the future. You’re cruising along and suddenly it’s like, nope, no more road for you.

But then I saw the ramp and realized simultaneously that my beloved road was going to turn into US1, and I achieved a minor amount of peace in my new land from this discovery. I was there that first time I thought I was at the end of the Earth because I was tired of cold Philadelphia. My old gold car with the different-colored driver’s seat door was chock full of things; my heart was full of resentful happiness at being in a place that was most certainly not what I had just come from, and I was looking for a warm, exciting replacement for the northeast, the place I had been born and raised and taught what the world was like.

Right Turn, Clyde

My father drove trucks for a living when he was younger, and so did his father. My grandfather was a big, quiet man with no sense of smell. He was a farmer later in his life, sweating all day in the fields and then selling produce on the side of the road. My brother and I, as early as age three, sometimes sat with him and sold the produce, picking out good cantaloupes, watermelons, and tomatoes for our customers. He gave us different amounts of money each day we worked with him, and eventually I realized he was splitting it with us—three-quarters for him and a quarter for us—silently teaching us the very basics of running a business. Sometimes we would sit outside all afternoon and he would never say a word, just slice up pieces of his produce to give us as snacks.

My dad rarely talks about him. My dad doesn't talk much anyway, and when he does, what he says isn't too extensive, just already well thought out, decided upon, and summarized. When Grandpa died, my dad stood over his embalmed corpse at the viewing, talking. I remember watching my dad move his head, shaking it yes, shaking it no, turning it side-to-side while he talked. He stood there for a long time, saying a lot of things. Maybe he was telling him a story. Telling him sorry. Telling him he'd miss him. Telling him thank you. Telling him he never knew what to say and still didn't, still doesn't.

My dad talks to himself sometimes, especially while he is driving or sitting on the porch in the early mornings with his coffee. I think he is staving off pain, regret. Talking himself through the negative feelings and refocusing his mind. His methods seem to work, because he is a very happy man.

One Friday morning, we were in his truck, heading to the driving range while I was visiting home after having lived at the end of I-95 in Miami for five years, and he said, “Right turn, Clyde,” a favorite line of his. The strange thing was that the golf course, Great Hope (a.k.a. Great Loss of Hope, Great Hopeless, Great Fail), was a left turn.

“Why are you going this way?” I asked. He stopped at a stop sign and I could tell if I let a hint of complaint into my voice, he’d turn right around and do whatever it was I wanted. I wanted to go the normal way, the way I thought was faster, but moreover, I wanted to not complain. I had spent a long time away from my family in Maryland, and my misery in Florida was becoming more and more apparent each hour I spent at home among my family and people who really cared about me. I was touched by the simplest things, things my boyfriend at the time, M.B., had failed to do for months, things I had trained myself to believe I did not deserve in order to cope with M.B.’s behavior, very simple acts of kindness such as someone turning to face me when I spoke to them, like my dad did now.

“I was just gonna go straight,” he said. “I don’t know.”

“Oh, okay, yeah, that’s fine. I was just asking,” I reiterated, more worried about making it known that I didn’t care than actually not caring. I felt panicked when I thought I upset people and was effusively apologetic during that time in my life. I wanted him my dad to follow his plan, but hadn’t been able to fully resist the antagonistic child inside that many of us can be when our parents are around, but I was able to push her down now and was quiet. We turned down a road I remembered but didn’t actively try to place.

Soon appeared a graveyard, and my dad pointed, a wave-point, the kind people do in places where everybody knows everybody, much like the place we were, a one-finger lifted from the steering wheel kind of wave, except this one had a little more direction, like he was actually pointing at something, not just waving. Then I remembered where we were. I saw the headstones. William S. Mason. Florence Mason. His parents. He wanted to see his parents, or wanted me to see his parents, and he was pointing at them as if to tell me they were there and explain that's why we took this long way.

I flashed back to the funeral, seeing my dad speak to his dad for the last time. Did he tell him to tell Grandma hello, that he missed her? I thought about sitting with Grandpa on the roadside, watching a bead of sweat drip from his nose as he worked. I tasted the cantaloupe I'd been taught to pick out, and smelled the must and grease of his work pants.

My father, of course, said nothing, just stopped and took a breath. I wanted to know so badly what he was thinking, but I didn't want to ask. I had already prevented him from saying what he might have wanted to say, something he might have wanted to share. I had severed the fragile moment of adult familial trust between us and replaced it with another kind of familial bond: the kind that allows other people to be ornery and get away with it. I told myself I didn't want to interrupt or intrude, but I knew the real reason I didn't speak was that the moment had passed when he would be willing to offer it to me, and I wasn't sure whether it was something I could ask for.