

Student Name

Date

MFA Thesis Proposal

Project Statement

The idea for my MFA thesis came from an essay that I wrote in Professor Zoellner's Techniques in Creative Nonfiction course. The main objective of this assignment was to draft a travel essay, a piece that explores the physical landscape of a place while pondering larger philosophical questions. I visited Black Star Canyon, a supposedly haunted trailhead in the Santa Ana Mountains, specifically for this assignment and wrote an essay about my experience there. For my thesis, I would like to do a collection of travel essays that explore similarly bizarre and obscure tourist destinations around Southern California. The culminating project will be a nonfiction book that incorporates research and personal experience under the unifying theme of the dark tourism industry in Southern California.

Although I am still in the conceptual phases of my thesis, I am focusing on three primary objectives to begin. First, I am continuing to revise my Black Star Canyon essay, which I have written about six and a half pages of. Secondly, I am outlining the contents of the book and workshopping my ideas about the larger unifying theme of dark tourism. Finally, I am actively looking for resources that will aid my research and writing process.

My biggest strength in my creative nonfiction projects thus far has been my willingness to experiment and take risks in my writing. I like to challenge myself and keep putting things on the page even if I think they might not stick. As for weaknesses, I do notice that I have a difficult time adhering to an overarching theme or bigger question, especially with longer projects. With the Black Star Canyon essay specifically, my main concern (which I discussed with Tom Zoellner) is developing a sense of Aboutness in the piece—the “so what” that digs into the deeper philosophical underpinnings of the place. My ideal thesis committee will be patient and mindful of this weakness, while also challenging me to refine my rhetorical skills and apply them towards a focused final product.

Sample of Work

Black Star Canyon (Working Title)

I decided that I would hike Black Star Canyon alone. A trail steeped in legends of massacre, occultism, and paranormal sightings cried for my sole attention. My dog would only slow me down, and my boyfriend spooked too easily. I wanted to trickle into the Santa Ana Mountains as a lonesome traveler, to fold the place into my pocket like a smooth curio.

I dug around my closet for my old school backpack and stuffed it with supplies. Water, sunscreen, snacks, a first aid kit, a small knife that retracted into a fake holographic key, a bear horn, and a pink taser. As I looked at the metal fangs of the taser, I realized that I had never used it before. It zapped like an angry hornet, imbuing me with fragile excitement. A slight plunk of electricity to lay someone out flat. My exhilaration bled into concern. If I was something sinister, I would look in cold, empty places for a girl roaming the hills alone.

One review warned, in no uncertain terms: STAY AWAY FROM THE TRAIL AT NIGHT. The hiker claimed to have heard screaming and the spray of buckshot and saw apparitions floating in the twilight. I scoured the internet for more definitive accounts of an otherworldly presence in the canyon, but the historical roots of the site proved difficult to pin down. Names of grizzled, soot-stained pioneers cropped up like daisies across blogs and local guides with little explanation. Other local fables described the dingey skeleton of a school bus toppled in a knoll and a band of satanists joining hands around a fire. To understand what I was walking into, I would have to experience the dark lure of the canyon for myself.

I was wary of witching hour in Black Star Canyon, but I was more afraid of what a person with real hands and lungs might do to me. One review lamented their car being broken

into. Another reported that their group was robbed at gun point. Immortalized in newsprint, I found a story of two teenagers who were attacked and brutally violated while hiking the trail. I found a lump of pyrite in my jewelry box and rubbed its glittering facets with my thumb. Fool's gold for spiritual protection.

The road into the canyon was peppered with gnarled oak trees and cragged patches of scrub. Burnt stumps shot up to heaven like old righteous hands. Some patches of earth were bright, bleeding green from the rainfall, while others were forsaken and screaming for water to touch them. Over Irvine Lake, the sky was muted blue, a sun-washed postcard that I kissed goodbye. I drove further into a brooding swirl of grey thunderhead clouds, noticing a raven floating high, high overhead, away from the mass of grey tissue. From afar, the mountains were striking charcoal monsters.

I parked in a sparsely populated lot facing an escarpment of red rock and rooted through my backpack, double-checking that my supplies were all accounted for. The hike would take about four hours if I hit a brisk stride and didn't get lost. I started out walking a long sand-stamped path that flew into the canyon straight as an arrow. I was getting a later start than I had planned. The bars on my cell phone fluttered, grasping desperately for a distant tower, and promptly died. The stoic arms of the trail enveloped me, and I walked on.

The first two miles was all flat land and no faces. My soles against the gravel, *crack crack, crack*. Sometimes I paused, to see if anyone was behind me, and I was greeted with a smothering silence. On either side of the path was a taut barbed wire fence, acting as a guardrail against wayward people and animals. When I first entered the gate, crisp blood-red letters read WARNING! MOUNTAIN LION COUNTRY. Before the homesteaders shot them, skinned them, held up their stiff jowls to take pictures, mountain lions ran freely in the bowels of the

canyon. Somewhere, their paws were still thumping the dust. Other lesser predators like bobcats, coyotes, and snakes were chattering amongst themselves in a secret tongue. I saw their scat and their hovels punched into the dirt, but they kept themselves hidden.

As I rounded the first crooked turn, I saw a black blob ambling towards me. For a moment I went dizzy with panic, my eyes struggling to decipher its contours. The ears pricked up, and the muzzle went still as marble. It strode closer, its body hunched forward. It was a cattle dog, spattered with salt and pepper markings, dressed in a ragged bandana. Its muddy eyes gauged me briefly, then turned to the turf beside me. It sniffed the brush, indifferent to my presence. I chided myself silently for startling so easily. The owner greeted me gingerly, *hello*, and passed by.

The barbed wire became more severe as I pressed up the path. Thick spirals of metal that could slice to the bone crowned the fences. I came to a fork in the road. On one side, the path led up to a towering gate brandished with those menacing silver teeth, gnashing at invisible stars. The sign warned of sudden, electric death. Beyond it, there would be a view of the valley, the motionless vista of the afternoon. Strangely, the gate was left open, as if by mistake. The other path roved further into the shade of the oaks. I passed by wondering what that higher path led to, and why it was left open.

On the left side of the trail, I came to a prim plot of grass protected by more fencing. The hush gave way to birds singing disparate notes into the wind. Their language rang placid in my chest. In the meadow was a square structure of cement blocks, plunging into the ground. An abandoned watering hole where cattle used to gather. The unscathed blades whispered a eulogy for the dead bucks. Over the years, the land had served many purposes—cattle ranch, coal mine, apiary, sheep range, mountain house—but here and everywhere else, everything but the bones

had evaporated. Nearby, a young cattle driver named James Gregg was shot dead at the turn of the twentieth century in a dispute over ten dollars in pasture rental fees. Lack of evidence led to a mistrial, and the killer, Henry Hungerford, evaded justice. Local lore claims that James Gregg prowls the canyon with a vengeful heart. I imagined the willowy shoulders stricken, slugged to the ground like lead. The man's imprint on this land just a milky memory. I tasted the air here, and breathed in a peaceful dignity, an oasis smack in the middle of an abyss. If I were a rusty cowboy ghost, I think I would burry my boots in the dirt and talk with God.

Under the first bridge, the tears of Santiago Creek swept down from the mountains. For the first time on the trail, I heard water christening stone, and I felt calm. I paused for a moment to soak in the chitter of the creek, to gaze up at the raptors surveying the land in lazy circles. Before ranchers shot at each other with hateful hands, there were other people who wet their lips with this water. Before missionaries and pioneers commandeered the trees, the mountains, and the air above the canyon, the Tongva people made their ancestral home here and across the Los Angeles Basin.

The mining boom of the late 1800s welcomed strangers, intrepid and blood thirsty men with long scraggly beards, who persecuted the original people. William Wolfskill, a wealthy landowner and mountain man of local legend, confessed to slaughtering a group of indigenous people who had stolen horses from local missionaries. Creeping inaudibly through the mountains with a band of trappers, Wolfskill stalked the unsuspecting travelers and ambushed their quiet circle with gunfire. Many were killed, and few escaped into the canyon. Like many tales of this region, its fibers are mangled and difficult to unravel. Still, as I stood beside the creek, I knew that this place had been ravaged by colonial violence. I wondered at the words unspoken, effaced from historical renderings. The grubby mountain men of yore are dead and long gone, but the

Tongva people still live across the region, persisting despite every brutal attempt made to wash away their narrative, their way of life, their home.

Graffiti was packed neatly onto the rusted slats of the bridge where I rested my palms. The tags became more flamboyant the further I traveled. Letters progressed into pictures, mushrooms and disfigured faces splashed across boulders in eroded rainbow scrawl. Some of the tags were sweet, earthly things: STEP LIGHT BREATHE EASY. Others spat acrimoniously: EAT SHIT. One tag popped up again and again, someone called JUNZTR. As I walked, I envisioned a face for this cryptic vandal, this elusive artist who needed to remind the world who they were.

The trail went on and on like a witch's brittle finger, eventually coming to pass a small encampment set by the creek bank. The plant life along the water grew amok in every odd direction, trampling on top of dead branches, flailing desperately towards light and water. A patch of palms sprung up, defiantly ratty and out of place. Another watering hole with rancid flumes of algae touched the water's edge. On the slope above, there was a small, battered shed with a bird feeder that had been baked white by the sun. Closest to me sat a lonely picnic table under a wooden gazebo. A ghost's playground, I thought. A ballroom for abandoned people.

I bared right, descending a narrow vein of rock which led directly to the creek. From here, I would be scrambling over boulders to get to the mouth of Black Star Falls. The route would be more perilous, my steps less certain. I checked the time on my phone and cursed to myself. The blanched cloud cover had tricked me; I had spent too much time moseying up the path, pondering at flora and remnants of the past. In a few hours, I would be flirting with the cusp of evening. With new resolve, I threw my legs forward, looking far ahead into the oblong

shadows. I bounded across a felled log and almost ran directly into bed of poison oak. With my hands pressed into my kneecaps, I stared at the most viperous green leaves I had ever seen.

In the brambles ahead, there were two women walking an Australian Shepherd. The dog froze behind a grey mass of brush and threw out frazzled growl. I sank to a crouch and extended both hands as the dog wiggled forward tenuously, its tail tucked in between its legs. The women made small conversation about the dog's prudence around strangers, laughing at the way its primal heart melted in the right hands. The shepherd felt more of this place than we could ever know, the hairs ridging its spine would prickle with the macabre vibrations of the canyon. After lavishing the dog with gentle praise and waving goodbye to the women, I continued along the jagged path.

After an hour of dodging poison oak and dashing across teetering logs, I came to rest on the smooth face of a boulder. Here, I took out my leatherbound notebook and scratched down the tones of the afternoon. I quickly clapped the notebook shut, tired of taking inventory of every pocket of moss and every bird feather. I let my mind flow with the creek. What I felt, resoundingly in my worn-down legs, was peace. I thought between pressing further towards the mouth of the Falls and turning back. I decided, after ruminating in the lilt of water falling over itself, that it was time for me to go.

Following the muddy paw prints of the shepherd, I trekked back beside the sinew of water, coming to the slender alley which ascended towards the main trail. Rolling along, taking my time to enjoy the chime of frogs and birds that was slipping into that desolate silence at the mouth of the canyon. I munched on crackers and sang to myself to stave off the quiet that was coming. No more people, just me and the gnats that clustered around the nape of my neck, licking at the grime on my tired body. When I stopped, the clouds pulled me forward, my vision

swimming towards an endless circuit of roiling cotton. With my back to the mountains, I passed the encampment, the bridge, and the eucalyptus.

Just before I came to the meadow, I heard a strange noise like the burst of a wind instrument from behind me. I turned and saw nothing. Another brassy sigh called out to me, but I fastened my gaze on the road ahead. The fork in the trail, which marked the final stretch of my travel, was drowning in that hollow quietness. The electric fence with a gaping jaw was now firmly shut. A cotton tail flew soundlessly into the thicket. All day, I had studied the lines of the canyon, guessing at its slippery shapes, but as my shoes tamped the gritty soil, I walked away with only a strange feeling. I fell back into windows of waning blue daylight like a soul resurrected. Had I stayed until nightfall, I might have understood the voice of Black Star Canyon more clearly. Meandering back onto the main road, the stillness puncturing my chest, I was glad that turned around when I did.