

A PORTRAIT OF A STRANGER

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LUX NOUVEAU: THE FANTASTICALLY STRANGE

One night in the dark I phone for a taxi. Immediately a taxi crashes through the wall; never mind that my room is on the third floor, or that the yellow driver is really a cluster of canaries arranged in the shape of a driver, who flutters apart, streaming from the windows of the taxi in yellow fountains. . .

- Russell Edson, “The Taxi” (1977)

FIRST:

The ways in which I am often struck by *Housekeeping* are legion, but here I would like to begin with just one passage, just one way:

These children, who were sky black and stark naked and who danced with the cold and wiped their tears with the backs of their hands and the heels of their hands, furious with hunger, consumed much of the woman’s substance and most of her thoughts . . . Sometimes it seemed to me my grandmother saw our black souls dancing in the moonless cold and offered us deep-dish apple pie as a gesture of well-meaning and despair. (Robinson, 26)

With little courtesy, Marilynn Robinson tangles the delusions of a strange woman and the kind intent of a grandmother. The rules of a first person point of view’s capabilities, stock mechanics, and syntax, all bow to Robinson’s style. Executed here is a magical realism, “dancing in the

moonless cold,” that makes generations of ordinary misery and kindness tangible. The sensational peculiarity of both Robinson’s narrative and the quality of her language, produce, in *Housekeeping*, a portrayal of girlhood and family that is at once intimate and estranging. The efficacy of her language buoys readers through the morass of personal, historic, and natural forces, as Ruthie wanders specter-like about her landscape. I like to think I am aspiring to emulate Robinson, though at the present moment my ability falls a little short to say the least. Still, her story is labyrinthine, wild, exciting. The words fall across my eyes like light against stained glass; a vivid production of new light and suggested form. As the intersection of colors becomes the composition of a rose window, so the partnership of words within Robinson’s sentences shed new light on our conceptions of beauty and home. In my own work, I aim to make that kind of color, even if the exact anatomy of my subject is not correct. In the meantime, I will chase magic. There is some hope that herein I will show you how I do so.

Before that, an aside on the matter of form. In this first section, I will attempt to paint with broad strokes the critical tools that I make use of, so that as I approach my project, the explicit choices made within might be rendered more visible.

For me, a description of fantasy must first begin with the location of it, the place –the actual place- from which it spawns and which it grows, and where it acts a useful departure from realism.

Within the American literary tradition, I find that there are two primary distinctions between realism and fantasy. The first, is that realism is easy to locate. That is, realism’s presence is taken as a matter of fact. It covers a broad swath of literary ground, and finds itself populated with every manner of mountain and plain, man and beast, machine and horizon. It is woven into

the thick colors and open space of Edward Hopper's paintings and the practical cut of American prose.

The second distinction is that realism is predicated in part on a belief in the tangible execution of language, to the ends of a direct philosophical, or ontological effect, is predicated on the idea that literature is a form of direct, visible action. We speak, and we are heard. Edgar Allan Poe refers to this as America's innate "utilitarian ability" (Williams, 283). It shakes down the medium of language into an exercise in what associations, linked together in a procession, might accomplish. The subject is there, before you, in the text and in real time. Speak, and let the urgent meaning be heard. There is something profound in the simplicity of that relationship.

However, this artistic model often does not lend itself easily to levity. The presence of devices such play, wonder, and humor, are uncommon except in those exceptions which could be considered both satirical and real. In such cases 'fun' works as a mode through which one can undermine a force whose extra-textual presence is too difficult to approach at face value. In contrast, realism's focus is on the immediate and tangible. It has a tendency to poke and prod at reality as it is presented to us in order to generate from that presentation.

Often, I find that the beautiful efficiency of realism distracts the erudite eye from seeing realism for the absurd production that it is. In recent years, Post Modernism has deliberately drawn attention to how the production of literature, often realism, is inherently absurd. In doing so, it has, more often than not, adjusted its form and content to meet that challenge. I am proposing much the same break from strict realism, though I am couching my own departure in the terms of a different genre.

My desire to part ways from realism stems from that fact that at its core, realism relies on the assumption that there is such a thing as a universal experience. This idea of universality is as much a fantasy as Hobbits are. What is ‘real’ or psychically feasible is a matter of individual experiences. I have told countless stories about growing up in Texas, much to the fascination and horror of my well bread East coast colleagues. They all but gawk over stories about bleaching, pep-rallies, the Texas pledge of allegiance, and the public school drop-out rate. I find these stories banal, and their effects frustrating at best. With distance I have not been able to attach a sense of strangeness to these facts of my former life. The quality of any flower appears normal if you are raised among the roots (Williams, 213). This is not to say that I find my previous context pleasant, or morally sound, only that it was often banal. In fact, I take an exceptional satisfaction in the dystopian firmness of the black, sandy, soil in which I am rooted.

This dystopian awareness also acts as a powerful tool in the crafting of fantasy. I take grains of my former context with me and compare them to the facets I find. For me, the infuriating banality of dystopia was “just how high school was.” Through this dissonance, realism’s supposition towards universality reveals a discrepancy in both lived experience and psychic possibility. As I find the day-to-day details of an East Coast everyday life foreign, so others find the mundane cruelties of my dystopia strange. Yet should there not be a mechanic to reckon with this dissonance?

Where before I found very little strange, I am often left in bemused dissatisfaction with the worlds I find inside of realism. For example, when I pick up a copy of *Catcher and the Rye* I feel more like I am peering through the looking glass than I ever did when reading *Alice*. How could a boy who stands for nothing find it in himself to be unabashed calling others a phony. There is a pervasive sense of strangeness to a text wherein a young man is angry without direction, when

there is so much to be furiously angry about in the world. Yet often, when I express my dissatisfaction with stories like this, or stories in which a perfectly mediocre marriage dissolves during a dinner party, I am given funny looks. More often than I am told that *Cater and the Rye* shows just how high school is. Still I cannot adjust myself. The uncanny strangeness of ennui and angst cling to me, especially when I am forced to contend with just how much there is to be explicitly angry about.

Here, fantasy finds ripe ground in which to prosper. As critic Brian Attebery states in the introduction to his review of American fantasy, fantasy “[undermines] the faith in things as they are.” (Attebery, 1) Inherent in fantasy is an acceptance of some degree of irrationality and other non-rational states. For those of us who often expect that claims to rationality will be deceptive, the project of fantasy fits naturally. The outward face of both humans and their systems need not be sketched as they are, but rather, as they might appear underneath. In broad terms, as realism relies on some undercurrent of universality, so fantasy relies on a fluid and unnamed presence waiting beyond that which has been explicitly stated. In doing so, fantasy speaks directly to human subjectivity. What is not said may be unconsciously filled in, in order for each reader to make sense of the parameters that guide the text. Though one might not be able to see the prudence of local government in my pieces, there is no intended defamation in their absence. Instead their absence is merely the possibility of another story. Implicit in this approach to both the reading and writing of fantasy is the understanding that variances in interpretation will unfold many more readings than can be consciously packaged into the story itself. This is part of fantasy’s uncanny beauty. That which is explicitly described through the text holds firm in the mind’s imagination, but as for the story’s stage? There is no real world here to insist upon particular structures or systems. There is only a wide and fluid possibility for the unknowable extents of experience and

imagination. While this particular facet may be true for other genre, it is particularly true for fantasy.

If all this talk feels particularly strange, that is by design. Entrenched within fantasy's vivid fluidity is the irrefutable presence of strangeness, which one must address if they ever hope to grasp the project of fantasy. I hinted at it much before, but here I would like to make it explicit: I lack ease. There is something inside of me that is tuned to a different frequency, and it forbids me from being comfortable. But, still I will not forfeit élan. This quality is not unique to me, nor is it particularly unique to writing as a hole, but it is a distinct facet of any elite institution's collegiate project. The patois with which we pick apart texts, pecking at the pages with a bird like discern, is bred and taught in all institutions of a similar ilk. William Carlos Williams calls this habit a loss, and a bastardization of nascent talents (Williams, 215), though he eventually found himself a cornerstone of the linguistic project he so resented, so perhaps his fervent stance should be taken with a grain of salt. He never the less works as a concise demonstration of my own excellent pilfering of patois. That ease is often mistaken for enlightenment despite clear historic, social, and self-reflective evidence that complacency breeds a kind of heaviness in the brain. One need only look at our current political station to understand how an ease with reality might be destructive, and how martialed attempts at realism are finding it ever more difficult to grasp the scope of this new world's absurdity. Such is our life. Still, it is only to save our own faces that we register an uneasiness with reality as fantastical, and it is only to save face that we then claim that fantasy demands too much labor to be effectively engaged with in the collegiate project.

But more than that too, unease strikes at the unquiet things that stories often seek to span. Regardless of genre or medium there are unsayable things that fiction can aspire to describe. Unease is a state of being, the point at which one becomes present within the unsayable. Our work

begins with the ellipses . . . Unease is not the thing that is crossed or dabbled with, it is the depths of work.

Again, unease is not unique to fantasy, but it is integral. To put it another way, a square is a rectangle, but a rectangle is not necessarily a square. Holding tight to strangeness allows one to feel the depths to which great, terrible, and wholly unexpected things might happen. To feel strange is to feel that nothing is entirely out of the realm of one's ability, as there is no explicit realm to which one belongs. Strangeness is not often a steady thing. It is reminiscent of the following Williams quote, "In spite of size its genius is shy and wild and frail, the loveliest, to be cherished only by the most keen, courageous and sensitive. It may die" (Williams, 214). Though Williams was speaking about taste, strangeness also finds itself as frail and lovely creature. Again, one must only turn on the news to remember how quickly the strange can become one of dystopia's many banalities. The answer then is to hoard a sense of strangeness, and remain conscious of the dissonance between expectation and experience that breeds the feeling of strangeness. Such a practice is likely to cultivate melancholy and delight in equal measure, but I have only found these useful tools when writing fantasy.

In fact, fantasy's ability to hold both bleak, unfortunate situations, with a heightened sense of play and fun, forms the groundwork for the "imaginative transformation" (Attebery, 106) of the very landscape that breeds said bleakness. When any subject is positioned between the supposed diametric lenses of misfortune and play, a subject's true variability might be revealed. Upon this fluidity, one can begin the work that I posed in the general sense earlier. The stage of a story may be set at an author's discretion, then cleared, and then a new set may be produced in yet unused corner. The landscape of a story is then the site of both its history and its potential; a set stage and a workshop. Thus, in writing fantasy, an author's task is to merge the desire to understand, and the

desire to imagine the possible. In navigating those desires, one can begin re-inscribing the landscapes presented.

This brings me to my next tool. The study of folk tales can lend a powerful hand to a fantasy author's understanding of landscape. The process and project of folk tales are concerned with the imaginative transformation of the landscape in which they are formed. They are shared and built upon by communities, not because they describe a real happening, but because they impose a hope for what could come, based in what has happened. Here we can see how "folktales link action with events in ways that evoke cultural reasoning and emotion." (Njoku, 161) When people in Texas speak of cowboys they aren't remembering searing heat, and miserable, filthy, work. They are remembering a hope for honor and pride, freedom and choice, that was taken when the world was bound up in the more capitalistic aspirations of barbed wire. The work of folk tales is about the imposition of aspirations onto comfortable social narratives, and in doing so, they refigure those narratives.

It should be noted that fantasy varies from this formula in its desire to not just extend cultural understanding, but to reshape and rewrite it in terms one's present desires. The work of folk tales is often used to extend and reaffirm social and cultural reasoning, not to make space within extant structures. Thus fantasy must break from that tradition if it seeks to imagine changes in our social world. Besides, fantasy is an inherently literary production. It will never achieve the vivaciousness of an oral tradition, nor should it aspire to do so. Let us not forget the river-like coolness of *Housekeeping*'s diction, and the way careful words transformed the immediate gestures of a family. The meticulous grace of words work as fine a magic as a literal spell, and without the time to savor metaphor, much of fantasy's magic would be lost.

Finally, there is one tool that is critical to the success of fantasy. A fantasy story must have an appropriate logic, or there is little point. Even *Alice in Wonderland* has a consistency about both its language and its direction that allows the reader to find a pattern, even if they cannot quite make meaning from that pattern. In this way, fantasy resembles the execution of poetry. There is a long and winding path towards emotional truth, as an author walks their reader through exceptional and un-real experiences. And so here I seek to follow in a well-known tradition: I tell all the truth but tell it slant. By this, I mean that fantasy's most powerful mechanism comes not from a reasonable relationship between things as we know them, and things as we can describe them, but from things as we might feel them. The truth is an emotional truth, but a literal lie. By leaning into this possibility, one can access an understanding of experience that might otherwise be unimaginable. The strange truth, is the truth.

Realizing that I am in the midst of something splendid I reach for the phone and cancel the taxi: All the canaries flow back into the taxi and assemble themselves into a cluster shaped like a man. The taxi backs through the wall, and the wall repairs . . .

- Russell Edson, “The Taxi” (1977)

SECOND:

The willingness to set absurd limits for ourselves and our surroundings creates the space necessary to propose that our own capacity might define the boundaries we live by. The concept of magic resonates with authorship. This comes from the “elevation of wordplay and symbolism into myth-like narratives,” (Attebery, 1) which characterizes fantasy. Authorship is, at its core, about how particular words can have enormous and intimate effect. It can refigure the difficulties of communication through the medium of color and heat and sound. If I were a wizard, I might say something that would cast a fireball and burn up the world. I could bewitch, I could command the world to build itself better. The act of participating in fantasy is an admission that one hopes to make meaning from something that is seen as having little, or absent, sense.

Here is where stories like *Till We Have Faces* shine. Through the repositioning of an old myth, C. S. Lewis seeks to redefine the tale of Cupid and Psyche in terms of family. In doing so, he changes our understanding of actions that are described as jealous and cruel in the original tale. Psyche’s sister, previously a strawman for women’s evil habit towards jealousy, is instead shown

to be a complex figure. Her attempt to separate her sister from Cupid is not an act of cruelty, but an act of love and a deep desire to be understood. At the climax, Oural finds that “the world had broken in pieces and Psyche and I were not in the same piece. Seas, mountains, madness, death itself, could not have removed her from me to such a hopeless distance as this” (Lewis, 122). Her greatest tragedy, and the reason she makes her case against the gods, is this fearful loss. This previously unnamed caricature becomes, through C. S. Lewis’ prodding, the vivid and complex figure of Orual, at once too ugly to love, yet acting mother to her beautiful sister Psyche. By placing the novel in first person, C. S. Lewis gives voice, reason, and agency to a tale whose initial themes revolved around a faceless ignorance.

In describing the work of C. S. Lewis, a British author, I am aware that I appear to stress habits of myth and folk lore, when one of America’s defining cultural marks is its youth and thus, a felt absence of long, heavy, history. For the most part America is absent a strong, singular, myth. There are tales of the West, but they do not rival *La Mort D’Arthur*, nor do they compare to the heavy ways in which Iliad and the Odyssey have shaped western thought. This might lead someone to believe that leaning into myth is a pointless approach, and that it is out of touch with the cultural ethos of the people I seek to write for. Yet it is this very absence of myth that preoccupies American fantasy. Rather than rely on an inherited sense of worth and meaning, American fantasy seeks to redefine the landscapes we have been given in terms of our own hopes and abilities. In essence, it is a desire to “be free” of the bounds placed upon us, whether those bounds are set by social constructions or physical limitations. The freedom which I desire is, among other things, a creative possibility. It is a freedom from having to describe worlds in which I would find my own wings clipped, as well as a freedom from having to walk in a landscape that is not natural to me. Thus, I have sought to create a home for myself which is not the place in which I was first described, but

rather, is the possibility of a winding mythos. As C. S. Lewis has done for Orual, so I hope to do for Texas

In doing so, I take advantage of folk lore's use of symbolic repetition. The repetition of a thing imbues that thing with power in and of itself, and mimics the ways in which we come to place value in our experiences. A singular event is an incidence, twice is a coincidence, but three times is a pattern. This cyclic habit, repeating stories, themes, and tropes, rather than create cliché can actually strengthen the affective force of a story. As Walter Benjamin states, "a story is different [from information]. It does not expend itself" (Benjamin, 366). Instead it is made from the repetition of things over and over again. This gives one the ability to revisit themes, and with each visitation, to build upon those themes until a world of understand has evolved from the cycles. While a work of fantasy may deny that things are as they are, the repetition and evolution of images gives a sense of both progress, and stability in well-crafted fantasy.

There is a chiefly affective power to stories that focus on a relationship between themes, characters, and landscape, rather than on the distinct power of individuated literary modes. This means that when a story that is rooted in a network, as opposed to a story that stands alone, independent of the world in which it exists, the story itself can function as a macro example of folktales' cyclical composition. As characters are returned to the same universe they build on and complicate relationships within that universe, enriching the stories that came before and came after through an extended, but not necessarily linear, or directed, narrative. One can see this approach to story-telling in the novel *The Things They Carried*. As each story examines what the soldiers carried, their experiences build in a huge, cyclical, examination of experience and feeling. When fantasy employs this structure, it creates space for greater variance within the established fantasy universe. Since the characters and magic become familiar, magic and character can mingle in

increasingly varied and complex ways. This then allows characters to not only exceed realism's expectations, but to exceed the expectations of even the fantastical universe.

In effect, this style of fantasy gives us the express permission to ask for more than we have been given. To achieve these ends, fantasy must be thought of as "a mode of resistance." (Attebery, 1) It is a resistance against conditioned modes of propriety and behavior. It is a resistance against a philosophy of literature that insists that the small glimpses of fun you cling too are worth less, because they are just that. The unanswered questions, which fantasy always begs, offers most readers the opportunity to fill in space with their own desires.

But I cannot stop what is happening, I am already reaching for the phone to call a taxi, which is already beginning to crash through the wall with its yellow driver already beginning to flutter apart . . .

- Russell Edson, “The Taxi” (1977)

THIRD:

Perhaps this particular application of a suspension of disbelief has always been easier for me. I was never so attached to reality that suspending disbelief took more work than buying into the subtle evils of realism. When due justice was served in the emotional construction of a plot, I often find it easier to buy into fantastic worlds. Growing up in a dystopian hell scape will do that to you. The very idea of the real world becomes difficult and exhausting when at every corner I have to be reminded of what the real world offers.

For me, growing up in Texas, it was the unfeeling chaos of Friday night football, and the apathy my school felt towards anything that couldn’t produce a trophy. It was the constant undermining I faced in any leadership position. It was the expectation that I be both quiet and eloquent. It was the very real threat of violence against my body because I was a woman and it was the very real threat of violence against my body because I was a queer person. It was the knowledge that nearly every authority figure would come down on the side of the very systems that hurt me so much.

Fantasy worlds create possible spaces that can be free of the baggage listed above. If there's no Christianity, or even monotheism, why would anyone hate queer people in a fantasy book? In these cases, conspicuous absence, while not ideal, was not an implicit defamation. I could imagine that a queer woman would be fine in a world where dragons were real. Borhes figures this best in his short story, "The Labyrinth of Babel," "Let heaven exist, though my own place may be in hell" (Borhes, 117). Should I be consigned to the real world; I would have it on my own terms. Failing that, I would not have the real world. Rather, the abilities of fantasy allow for a new location to be devised, one influenced by the landscape of personal experience and the unknown. Within those bounds, it is easy to imagine a heaven by inverting and making fantastic the fire at my feet. Miracles feel possible when the mechanics of the world are turned over in favor of untold possibilities. It is easy to believe that one can get out of bed, when they have seen someone move mountains, part seas and rewrite histories.

I used to force myself out of bed by reminding myself that if Annabeth Chase could slay a cyclops, then I could face the way my director conspicuously refused to acknowledge the fact that I was drum captain.

If Gandolf could get between the Balrog and the rest of his party, then I could get between the only out-kid on drumline and the rest of the world.

If Shai can change the fate of a nation by re-writing one man's life, then I might have my words, and solace with them.

By presenting a world in which anything is possible, small victories can appear like the first steps in an epic journey, instead of just the necessary means by which one gets by. Fantasy becomes a mode by which we survive the real. At its core fantasy posits the space we need to

breath. In a text that bows its head to explicit realism, the politics and trials of the real world are always at play in the background, like crackling static behind a radio station that is just barely holding a tune.

When fantasy works there is nothing like it. As distancing as my experiences growing up in Texas were, I now find that the American Southwest is one of my favorite places to play with fantasy. For every instance of searing difficulty, there are also moments of beauty. Larry McMurtry captures some element of this in his non-fiction piece *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen*. His stories ruminate on the shapes that storytelling takes, and the places where it is found. Born two hours north-west of my own home, and sixty-years my senior, McMurtry seems to have thicker and deeper roots than I have yet to put down. Yet, we find ourselves in the same soil. Intermixed with stories of a dairy farmer who had given way to despair and the tense difficulty of winding up stories in a vast, uncompromising, nothingness, are mediations on the virtues of Dairy Queens and how one might discover the key to antiquarian books in a rich man's dumpster. Perhaps most poignant of all, he remembers the claim of his mentor Frank O'Conner, that "you can't make art out of unredeemed pain." (McMurtry, 41) I have grown to find this true, but I would like to introduce to that pain the uplifting and distancing effect fantasy has.

Fantasy is quick to make critical distance between words and a subject, placing metaphor, magic, and epic adventure between an author and the subject at hand. As no person in their right mind would handle a baking sheet without mittens, so I would not handle my past with bare hands. I learned to weave the art of stories along the same long horizons that McMurtry has. With ritual difficulty, my family has taken road trips out to southern California every summer since I can remember. As children, the cramped space and barren land lent itself to the pondering of slights and the accumulation of new ones. No matter how big the car, with five sets of elbows, at least

one is likely to find itself in your ribs. The emptiness took this too. The wide movement of the world outside the car's window, and your own personal stillness within your seat had a habit of reducing all experience into a mimicry of that flat, wide, horizon. Yet, while absence could turn even aggravation stale, it could not turn the turning over of aggravation. For upwards of twenty-six hours, three days of travel time, I had nothing and an audience. It was a start.

Since then, I have learned to bring my personal captivity and mittens to Milton and other acts of greater, more poignant, cruelty. I know that I can recognize and even despise the things that hurt me, even as I learn to look at those experiences with a sense of revisionary possibility. Sometimes things are wrong. Often, they can become better. In the words of other authors, I search for clues that will lead me on the path to piecing together my own possibility.

There are artifacts of my familiar Southwest scattered throughout the iconography of other fantastical authors. John Carter in particular adored the West, though his site was the image of the West, a facile and photographic representation predicated on the stillness of Arizona in the moonlight. Under his pen the arroyos were rendered as a "dead and forgotten world," so alien compared to "any other spot upon our earth." (Attebery, 111) Through this otherworldly description, Carter marks himself as one unfamiliar with the realities of his subject, a voyeur in the presence of an America unknown to him. I am not citing Carter now because he is a signpost. Like the folks in McMurry's *Archer City*, I know the way to hell well enough. I need seek no guidance from traveling men (McMurry, 15). However, Carter's fantasy worlds point towards an application of escapism, which I find non-productive, and in its examination, hope to shed light on a critical element of my project. Rather than seeking to redefine a landscape through the artificial creation of a critical distance and a subsequent reflection, this mode of fantasy creates a world that is not meant to be salvaged or even accessed.

Yet Carter does strike upon a figure that I find myself grappling with as well, and perhaps his elevation of this figure is the point at which our conception and execution of fantasy are able to diverge. The ageless outsider, capable of traversing the wide world, and disposed of untold possibility, covertly signifies the “nearest thing to an aristocratic tradition in America: landed Southern wealth” (Attebery, 116). The presence of the Southern wealthy is a variation of the tried and true trope of the Chosen One, with a southern, gentlemanly twist. In Carter’s work, this is figure is a hero. In mine, they are the somewhat inept, yet omnipresent Stranger. The Stranger is a tool used to undermine Carter’s approach, to both character and landscape. The hero’s belief in their centrality, their predisposition towards ‘luck’ and their presence in almost all conflict becomes a serious deficit that is exploited and examined through the Stranger’s various, occasionally tangential appearances. In doing so my ambition is to sever whatever expectations one might hold for the unfolding of a heroic arc. Landscape and history are not a prop piece which gives nominal respectability to an otherwise unpalatable character, they are the means through which truth, however slanted, can be felt.

In Texas there is a sky. This should not surprise you, as I have spent the last two pages describing horizons. However, I would like to put this in context. In Haverford there are trees and they are all so god damned tall. They fill up the blank space in the corner of your eyes. They’re all you can see. There’s nothing but freaking trees everywhere. There is no sky here. What little sky is available hangs above and appears flat, piecemeal. Back home the sky is round, and it sits before you and behind you, and all around you. Even when stratus clouds stretch tight across the sky there is always an awareness that there is a bowl on the other side. It is like seeing the skin stretched tight over the head of a drum. When I think about fantasy, and my ability to bring the possible into a space that used to be my home, I think about the sky. So often in fiction the sky becomes a

metonym for ambition. If that is the case, then I hold that huge sky with me where I go now, and I think that perhaps, I can imagine a big enough possibility to fill all of that space.

Still I am not so enamored with fantasy that I can't admit its failings. When fantasy fails there is hardly anything more mind-numbing. The key then, must be to run the margin of reality, to sight and measure fantasy's literary horizon and make of it what I will. A world must have a life of its own, or else we must succeed in defying all reason. Take flight, and find something with which to draw the boundary between earth and sky, the long lines which surround us, even if the trees hide their shape. If I could not make sense of my home then, now I make worlds in which a new, stranger, sense can be made. That is the primary directive of fantasy.

THE SHEPARD SISTERS

I am a stranger in a small town, and I imagine that would be a more novel thing if there were more of a town to notice me. No cars. Almost no people.

A boy lays in the middle of the street, soaked to the bone, with blue lips.

We are miles from deep water.

There is rubble among the streets.

I wish I could say that I understood what had happened here, but the ghosts that must haunt this place lie still behind their boarded up windows. In fact, if I could just say that I understood what had happened, I believe I could be happy.

At last, I find a slouching bar where a washed-out sign with broken neon lettering reads, “Words, Words, Words,” in slanted, looping, letterings. Inside the air is stuffy. Still the lighting is warm and welcoming. A forest of screens section-off private dining areas and the high ceiling makes the room feel open. The bar at the back is empty, save for a young woman in a sea-glass shift. She might have been lovely once. Now her hair is pulled back into a ragged bun, and her

skin is sallow with sleeplessness. She looks my way with milky, unseeing eyes. After a moment she turns away again without so much as a hello.

There's a leather bound notebook in my pocket. It feels heavy, although I know that it can't be any heavier than my wallet. After a second I pull the notebook out and run my fingers over the cover, and smooth and cool as moving water. Something flutters in my chest; a reminder that some excitement still lives inside me.

"Excuse me, Miss, but I just bought this book from a man down the street. He said that if I needed help putting it to good use that I should talk to the woman at the local bar. Said you'd have a few suggestions." The woman with unseeing eyes begins to shake. She covers her mouth with a fold of one trembling hand. The other grips the top of a barstool, as her body leans on the chair's steady feet. My first impulse is to rush to her side and offer some kind of aid, but there's a stranger's polite distance between her and me. How crude it'd be to walk where I wasn't sure I was welcome.

Then a breath comes from the woman's lips in a long slow drag, as if God has reached down and re-started her lungs with a gentle pull. Her hand falls away from her mouth and she looks in my direction once more. There is a concise upward tilt to her chin.

"Please sit down," she says. "Let me tell you a story." She pulls out a chair with a swift, sharp movement, and then stands beside it like a sentinel.

"Do you happen to know what the book actually does?" I ask. A hot flush runs up the back of my neck for asking such a fool question, but it's the one question I've got. The woman doesn't answer right away. She tilts her head as if she can hear some far off whispering.

“When you bought the book, what did the man say?” she asks.

“He just said that it was my miracle,” I say. The book in my hand falls open at the slightest provocation. Its pages are all empty, just swaths of waiting, white paper. The man who sold me my miracle had said that this woman would be my answer, too.

“Ah,” the young woman says. “Well, devils are funny like that. Listen to my story first, and make sure you take notes. My story’ll make everything plenty clear,” she says, pulling out the chair just an inch more. I drag my feet towards the chair, and let her seat me at an empty table. Her fingers are long and graceful, but her nails are unkempt. She plucks at a loose thread in my shoulder’s seam.

“What’re you doing? It’ll come apart,” I say, reaching to stay her hand. She gives my worrisome fingers a quick but firm smack and smiles something cautious.

“Do you want answers? Then trust me. You know what they say. If you doubt the dock, you’re sure to drown,” she says.

I let my hand relax back into my lap. She begins to wind the twine around her fingers, like a tiny loom that her thumb shuttles. I fetch a pen from my pocket and put the tip to my paper. A single black dot blooms while I wait. She takes in a deep breath through her nose and says, “Old Miss Thress pushed her crooked, bony, fingers against the tight lines of black and white ink that covered the daily press, and she said, ‘Your sister is at it again.’”

The house lights rise, like a new morning springs up from the cracks in the rosewood floor. Daylight streams in, and the air takes on a sudden humid weight. Shadows stretch to match pop-up people. Half a dozen of them are shuffled into the booths. They whisper and they shuffle, and

they damn near take my breath away. The veil parts before the Weaver's eyes, and in their wake I see a round, piercing, darkness.

"Old Miss Thress" was blind, like all of us Weavers are. It's the price we pay for our magic: the eyes for the voice, that kind of thing. Still, Old Miss Thress could always seem to read the paper, especially when it gave her a reason to stick her nose into other people's business. Anyways, I just folded my copy of yesterday's paper over and over again, until it felt thick and strong beneath my fingers. My new fan crackled with every swipe, but it gave me enough air for the moment. I side-eyed Old Miss Thress, and I said to her, 'You don't know that it was my sister.'

"You see, Old Miss Thress had been reading the paper, and complaining about the witches since before I had begun to lose my sight, and she would no doubt go on complaining about them long after I gave up my sight for good. It was a great pity that I was apprenticed to such an unpleasant old woman. The second she learned that my little sister had started running with witches, every little thing from the poor weather, to her arthritis became my sister's fault. I almost wish it was. If my sister had given Old Miss Thress just half the little curses that followed her, it would only make me love my sister more. Well, when I talked back, Old Miss Thress just hacked up a cackle, half bent over her cotton dress.

"She asked me, 'Who else drowns bothersome boys?'

"And I told her 'If a boy's bothersome enough someone will find a way to see him drown.' About that time the door opened with a chime, and the Good Doctor walked in from the dusty red street. The Good Doctor was the particular sort of citizen that was often heard of but rarely seen. She must've been nearly six feet tall, and her face looked to be about forty years old, although everyone in town knew that couldn't possibly be true.

“Still, I liked her. She was raising a monster out on the edge of town, and I knew how hard that must be. My sister and I have siren blood, and I did all the raising in our household. Besides, the Good Doctor released me from having to smile pretty at Old Miss Thress. That’s a blessing I’d count any day. I felt along the tops of chairs until I found a table with a red vase sitting in the middle. Back then I still saw the shapes of most things, but that vase kept me centered. It was one bright red spot in a dim room, like a lighthouse in a fog.

“I hailed her, and she hailed me. We met in the middle of that dim room without any other words. I listened to her boots strike along the wood floor, marching closer and closer, until her dark hand seized a chair at my side. The Good Doctor always seated herself with a kind of particular care that exempted her from the trivial clatter that folks like us produce. She gave me a thread from the shoulder of her dress and I gave her a story. The veil over my eyes receded, and before me, as the world exploded into color and noise. It came in fits and starts, as a tangle of kindred senses. A forest grew, impossibly green, with shadows impossibly dark, and figures, impossibly alive.

“There was a monster that lived in the periphery of the forest, a tall and tragic, Frankensteinian thing. It was only half as horrible as the predators that made a habit of breaking innocence in the deep murk of wood and flesh. Hemlock grew from the monster’s fingertips when it pricked itself, so all things waking would beware. But there was a creature that tottered on the edge of death, and no matter how weary he could not escape the monster. Lying in a pool of his own blood, what had once been king was now in no place to fend off the long arms of the monster embracing it.

“The monster brought the creature to the Good Doctor, but the Good Doctor was not there. She was gone, long gone, gone with the morning, and no one could say when she would return. The monster looked down at the broken creature curled up in its home, and did not hesitate to use its own heartstrings for the suture.’

“As I pulled back, the dust fell away, and I saw, in a moment of clarity, the look on the Good Doctor’s face. I wish I had realized then, as the Good Doctor did, the weight of that story. She rattled off a bone-sunk sigh and something, her fingernails maybe, clicked carefully against the table in slow, measured strikes. I asked her if there was something wrong with my story, but she held herself in the kind of silence that implied she was done talking. I reckon she lived in that silence.

“Except, then she said, ‘I wish people would stop calling me a doctor,’ and she became a cacophony of sound. Her chair scraped against the wood floors as she pushed herself to her feet. Her boots now struck the floor with hard, measured strides, and the beads in her hair clattered together, and the rough denim of her clothes slid together. I tried to go after her, but the sound was all around me, and I made the fool mistake of letting go of my chair. I had nowhere to go, but back to that red vase.

“And then Old Miss Thress, she said, ‘You know when I as a girl, the witches didn’t get into this much trouble.’

“Damn that old woman. By the time I had calmed myself down, the door had sounded with a soft chime and the Good Doctor was gone to me. Well, then I—”

“Wait, can we follow her?” I ask. The weaver frowns and shakes her head.

"The more I know about a person, the easier it is to imagine where their threads go. I told you, the Good Doctor's not often heard from," she says with a shrug as if that explained away all my curiosity.

"But her story, what happened to the monster?" My notebook is by now filled half with story and half with questions about the strange thing she spun before me.

"Be patient and listen," she says. Her dark eyes catch what little light there is and reflect it back to me, like the surface of deep water. I can see my own wide and unknowing face in her reflection. Yet as I watch her blindness begins to settle back in, distorting the dark surface of her eyes with a milky film. The weaver beings pulling at her threads again, keeping the veil at bay.

"The door to my Weavery opened with a chime. Like clockwork, the visitors shuffled inside, and I stood my ground by my red vase. There were two pairs of feet moving towards me, tapping along the wooden floors. One pair wore a linen skirt, and it made a noise like wind through the tall grass whenever they moved.

"I hailed them, and at first there was no reply. I heard a soft thud and then a cough. A voice spoke, soft and nervous. I would have known that voice in death. My sister had come to visit. You know I practically raised that girl? She said, 'It's been a while since I last saw you.'

"Well I was as flustered as a new foal. I could feel my hands shaking, every ounce of me wound tight with a barely tangible anxiety. One after another, my words came rolling off. I offered her something to drink, I pulled out a chair. Oh I could hear Old Miss Thress' voice then croaking, 'Your sister's at it again,' in the back of my mind. It rattled around in there. That must've been what set my hands to shaking. It was either that or the girl my sister had brought with her.

“Forget about what you know, all the old stories, or the close encounters. You’ve never known a witch until you’ve met Meli Abernathy. Her linen skirt rustled like dry grass as she pulled out a chair. Back then, it seemed like my sister brought Meli everywhere. My sister patted my arm, and I could imagine her soothing smile. I could imagine it so well in my mind that I could map it out over the impressions of color and shadow that faced me.

“My sister said, ‘You don’t have to fuss over me. I’ve just been stuck in my own head a bit. Meli thought a story would do me good.’

“I gave Meli the good courtesy of a greeting, and she was snide back. Meli always spoke with a heavy drawl and a cool evenness that undermined the girlish tilt of her voice. It was her fingers that brushed mine when I asked for a thread. I felt the rough make of linen between my fingers. I might have liked her as much as a snake bite, but there’s not a Weaver out there who can resist a story. I suppose curiosity is still my cardinal virtue.

“Red dust rolled up from the floor. The ceiling and the walls fell away as the sky came down to meet the flat horizon. Their town folded up from the ground like a pop-up book springing free of the wet-starved mud cracks.

“Once upon a time there was an old soul with a young man’s face. He wandered the vast wastelands of red earth and the thick, oversweet depths of the bayous. The face he wore was cut deep by a pinched brow, and a frown like an open wound. His feet were driven by his follies. He searched for an empty grave he had placed and then forgotten. Perhaps if he could find it, he could rest. Until then, he carted his wares on his back.

“In a town by a river, a girl found him, and she asked him for a dream. He said, I sell no dreams. But she insisted that for a dream, she could find what he was looking for. The man said, I

sell no dreams, but look here, come closer, this is better. And he showed the girl a miracle. It looked just like watch, and it went *tick, tick, tick*. For the watch, she would give him wisteria. She said, remember. The man remembered his grave, and the girl with her watch wondered where it could take her.

“The watch’s noise was incessant, always tick, tick, ticking, but if she listened carefully she could hear something else ticking, like an echo. She followed the sound out past the edges of the city, where the fairy folk crept in. They pushed trees up through the concrete, as if no one had ever told them that stuff’s what defines stability. The watch led the girl deeper, out to the forest, where’ . . . where I found myself blind.

“Like an aperture circling shut, the world closed off before my eyes. The end of my thread dangled out in the open air, so frail and thin that I couldn’t see it.

“All Meli had to say was ‘oops.’ She had broken her own thread, and all she had to say was ‘oops.’ I have an inkling now of what story she didn’t want my sister to hear, but back then she was eager to clear out. I was more concerned with seeing my sister go. Meli’s chair screeched across the floor before she even suggested they leave. I offered another story, even as my lips felt dry and my tongue felt heavy. Meli’s fingers tapped against the table, one after another in slow succession. That linen skirt of hers started rustling again.

“I heard my sister sniff and scuff her toe against the ground. Her boot caught on one of the table legs, rattling the salt and pepper. Her hands fumbled on the table, and then she ran her hand through her hair, and she sighed, and I wanted so badly to reach out and grab her, to prove beyond all of that noise that she was real. That she was here.

“But my sister just sighed again and told me it was alright. Of course then Meli started talking. She said that they had errands to run, business to get to.

“I was so sure she smiled as she willed my sister away.

“Witches are like that you know; they smile while they take. The Cyclamen Coven in particular are a brand of tantalizing. They run like fire across the edges of town, wild, haunting girls, sprinkled all the time with the earth’s detritus. Dust settles like cross stitches against their skin, and dirt cakes under their fingernails like the world springs from their bodies, and not the other way around.”

Eyes as black as deep water. She draws a finger from the hinge of my jaw to the tip of my chin. The threads tangled up in her hand brush against my neck as I swallow.

“Can you see them? Wild girls with such unatonable depths. It’s easy to see why my sister wanted so badly to join the Cyclamen Coven, all those years ago. Meli worked her magic with a honey trap smile and sweet molasses teeth.”

She relaxes back, releasing me from her hold. It is only then that she seems to recognize the lively shadows she’s conjured. Her vacant eyes watch them with a sharp nostalgia threading through her features.

“The worst part is that this mess is half my fault,” she says. “I remember thinking about that, as the doorbell chimed and then the rickety wood door banged shut. When my sister first started running with those witches I was scared half to death. I had just started my apprenticeship, you see, and the hours were long and miserable under Old Miss Thress’ thumb. So I went to the devil.

“It was a simple kind of decision; either sell your soul for the guaranteed success of the waking world, or place your bets on retribution after death. I couldn’t leave my sister up to fate like that. After all, fate had been so unkind to us. But do you know what happened? I went to that man and I asked for a miracle. I have siren blood, I shouldn’t have had to lose my eyes to talk like a weaver, but I love my sister. If my eyes were the price of a miracle, I would pay it. I prayed my eyes to the devil and he sold me a miracle that sealed my sister’s fate. I asked to keep her safe and she fell in love.

“Sometimes I remember a song she used to sing. It still haunts me now, like a ghost slipping between an old house’s walls. I think she got it from my mother, but I swear on my life I can’t remember hearing my mother ever sing it. Hell, I can never seem to recall the words, anyways. At least the tune is comforting. It reminds me of her.

“Have you ever seen the Coven House? It’s a small, rickety, dot of a building with a gnarled sentinel oak tree standing tall in front and dry, dead grass for miles around. It was always hard to think of my sister really living in that place, except for when I imagined the tree. I used to hope that she felt at home with the other witches, just because I thought my sister deserved a home.

“I used to wonder if they would let me see her. I was thinking about visiting her that night, just after she had visited me. That was when I smelled the smoke.

“The Coven House is far on the other side of town, but even I could see their mother tree burn from this very doorway. It was like God had opened her mouth and screamed out into the night. My God, the fire was so bright. The witches put their tree out real quick, but that tree poured out smoke from its hollowed body well past sunrise the next day. The ashes were a powerful thing. Even across town they scratched at my throat. Everything got a fine layer of it. I hadn’t seen the

town dusted like that since the last time it snowed here. I hadn't heard it so quiet since the last snow either.

"No one stepped foot inside my weaver while the sun was still up. No one, not even the paper boy. Old Miss Thress made a fuss about that. A couple people got out and swept the streets. I heard the dream outfitter a few blocks down making a ruckus about his windows. It damn near killed me. Do you know what it's like to wonder if your sister burned the night before?

"But my sister returned that night. I had never felt relief like that. I fell to my knees in a sob. She tried to comfort me but something was eating her. It was a story, I knew it. She told me she went to the Good Doctor's house to see the monster. My sister was a sometimes-friend to the monster back before the accident left the Good Doctor's household in a tricky spot. My sister told me about the shimmery heat, the clouds of red dust and ash that rose from the street into stripes of wavering air as she walked that long solitary road. She told me how she had asked for the monster, how he had been out in the forest. An unnatural thing; to be so preoccupied with the forest.

"She told me of the boy that stirred beyond the Good Doctor's door frame, lifting from the blue paisley couch. He looked young, grave, but hardly older than she was. White bandages bound his chest like exposed ribs. He looked past her to the road, and then forward, at some minutia of the Doctor's walls. A mirror maybe. A speck.

"He asked for the monster too, except he knew the monster's given name. Now, nobody really knows the fae from regular folk until they've started to kill you slow, but speaking a given name . . . That's as clear a sign as blood. About that time, I remembered the Good Doctor's story. I suppose this was what her monster had brought home. I can't speak to why the Good Doctor would let one of the fae stay in her house, or let it get her monster's name, but I do know one thing.

God Bless the Good Doctor, she shut the door in my sister's face as soon as the fairy opened his mouth.

"That was the part of the story where my sister started really talking, talking fast like she only had so much time. She started talking about hunters, and her dear Meli, and the fairy king. I usually try to keep my nose clear of that politics stuff, but here it was, eating away at my sister. Some time ago hunters went looking for a siren's daughter, and Meli sold out the fairy king to save my sister. I think that was the story Meli didn't want my sister to hear, or something close to it. Now if the fairy king had just died, no one would have had to worry, but that's the damn thing about the fae. They've got three hearts, and only one of them feels. They're damn hard to kill. Worst of all, my sister hadn't heard from Meli since the recumbent king set fire to their tree. When all else failed her my sister came to me.

"She was in hysterics for a few hours. I talked her down, and then I put her to bed. When I sold my eyes, my sister was supposed to be safe. So I figured I would go to the devil and get things cleared up.

"Apparently, my miracle was a one-time thing. Hunters didn't take my sister so that was that. I figured I could just get another one, but this time he wasn't so eager to sell. Said it would take a miracle on a scale I could *never* afford to stop this mess from panning out. But you know I love my sister and so I begged him to give me something to change what was happening. Still he denied me. I'm ashamed to say I lost my temper a bit. You see, everyone buys miracles. Me, Meli, the fae, the Good Doctor, and sometimes we all damn ourselves just trying to get out of the tangle. When I looked in his eyes, I knew he would let me lose my sister. I called him the devil to his face.

Who else would promise that they could change the world, and then let it get so tangled up, so filled with loss?

“He just looked at me real slow. Then he said, ‘Change is twofold miracle: one in the name and two in a trade. Anyone who’s got the prescription can fill it. All they have to do is give up habits.’ Then he put his hands up and he said ‘It’s not really up to me how many people give up how much,’ like he hadn’t taken my eyes.

“I said to him, ‘I just want my sister safe.’ He said, ‘Damn what you want.’

“You know right after he said that he looked awfully sorry. I think he sent you to me in part because he must’ve been awfully sorry. Well, his repentance might make him right with God but he will never be right with me.”

She leans back in her seat, and her fingers grow still, but the story still nibbles at the edge of my mind. A need is wound tight in my belly. We have made it this far; I have to see her through to the end.

“And then what?” I ask.

She smiles real slow, white teeth, red mouth, dark eyes.

“I knew then, that I had nothing left to lose. So I said to him, ‘Thank your God I don’t get my way,’ and he let his silence answer me. Well, I suppose it’s all over now.” She lets her hands rest against the table. They tremble with a faint tremor born of exhaustion, and just like that the lights fall. The ghosts rush out, and heavy, dry air settles down on my shoulders. In this new, dingy world, I still feel that need wound tight in my fingertips. The woman in the sea glass shift closes her eyes and leans her head back.

“You still haven’t told me what exactly the book does,” I ask. She takes a deep breath, in through her nose, and out through her mouth. Then she lowers her head once more. Her hand reaches out and finds my cheek. Her gaze falls to my face in a long, slow motion, as the cloudy veil settles between her eyes and the world.

“What is written in the book is prefigured,” she says.

A kind of numbness settles over my mind. The only words I can form are dumb, and plain.

“I’m sorry?” I ask.

“What you write in the book has always been true,” she says.

My mouth forms some kind of reply, but my mind is filled with a heavy emptiness. Something high and hysterical itches at the back of my throat as I look down at my hands. The sob, or the laugh, just waiting there inside of me, never breaks. Instead I look down at my page and see black ink. I try to drag my pen over the last few lines, but the ink dries up, and only an indent in the page is made. I make a few absentminded scratches at the corner of the page and the ink runs like a river. The black water holds the room’s light and when I stare deep into that darkness, I see my own eyes looking back at me. I lift my head to face the woman, and some part of my heart twists.

“Is that it? You just . . .” Again, I feel that my tongue is heavy, dry, and dumb. I can’t seem to remember why I thought this woman would give me something beyond what she wanted, what she needed, what she understood. If only my pen’s black river could come from between my own lips. I would need no words, just the river.

“I get my way,” she says with a shrug. “Some of us devils are just funny like that.”

Her face lights up for a moment, and gasps a soft breath. “Oh I think I remember how that old song went,” she says. She starts singing, humming to herself a little old tune, “And I said, hold my hand. Oh baby it’s a long way down, a long way down . . .”

THE GRAVE DIGGER'S DAUGHTER

The Good Doctor first came to the graveyard while I was out, up north at school. After that she didn't come back for a very long time.

My father had me flown back from school in a metal box that shook and rattled as it passed through the thick bilious clouds that surround our town in the late summer. When I arrived my father set me on the porch with the intent that he would reacquaint me with the family business once and for all. But he forgot, I suppose. Such are the obtuse ambitions of my father.

While I was at school, I did my damnedest to keep from coming home and now that I'm here it's less than ideal. Now I sit on the porch rails in a post-peak heat that day after day whispers fall's promise of cool air even as the earth still boils. It is a fever that has broken, though we are still left to sweat out the dregs. I wait for the world to arrive at ecstasy. That is the kind of thing they taught us at school: ecstasy. They taught us to read until we found it, buried in every other heart.

My father didn't really think that way. After he first brought me home, back when the birds still bothered at me, a stranger came to ask for his story. It seemed like a harmless request, but oh he screamed at the Stranger, called him a vulture. My father had found that strangers are often like that; the kind of miserable bastards that subsist by sucking the misery out of other people's bones. They flock to him, and seek to unearth his work. This stranger talked a big game, promised that

my father's story could become truth within the bounds of the Stranger's black notebook. Unfortunately for him, my father has long since spent the last of trust and patience. Such is the curse of a grave digger in a small town. I always liked stories though. I wished he would talk to someone.

That was the first time my father had stepped out onto the porch in a long time. He watched the stranger skitter off, back towards town, until he was indistinguishable from the red dirt.

Then he turned to me and said, "A blue norther's supposed to be commin'."

I had really hoped so, but one didn't come. Perhaps that was my own kind of obtuse ambition. We were well into the wet season, when all cold fronts became heavy rain storms, and ran the muddy banks of our local river red. It would have been awfully out of character for August, and just downright unreasonable for September. Besides, it's not really a blue norther if you can see it coming like that. I supposed my father was just making conversation.

I first saw the Good Doctor on August twenty-fourth, just a little past noon, when it was too hot for any living creature to be willfully out of the shade. On that blue-sky day, the Good Doctor strode in, dressed in a denim pants suit, and a dark look. She passed me by without so much as a good morning, and left me with only the cicadas as conversation partners.

The Good Doctor sat down in front of a single grave, and read aloud from a book in her lap. Then she stood. She turned. She left. She did this again and again and again. Each time she looked clear past me, and kept her lips pressed firmly shut till she arrived at her grave.

It stung, it's true, but lucky for her I'm the curious sort. No amount of rudeness could stop me from wondering why she came at all. To the best of my knowledge the Good Doctor didn't

have family. She lived alone, about as far away from the town as I did, but in the opposite direction. Perhaps in the few years I was away, her sister came to live with her, but that notion seemed strange to me. My father had always warned me not to ask about the Good Doctor's sister. See, my uncle worked the Dream Shop. The Good Doctor sold him nightmares.

By and by she became a regular, pacing along the pathways. Her feet beat down the sinewy new green things that sought to make daughters and mothers of themselves in the easy dirt. Beneath her breath she muttered lines, distinct lines, of poetry, prose, history, as if she were trying to memorize them; or as if someone were listening.

I wondered who ran our town hospital if she was here all the time. I wondered what relation she had to the grave. I wondered if she would tell me if I asked. See, I'm good with stories. I had heard about the burial of that grave on the rare occasions that my father ventured out onto the porch and muttered to himself about visitors and their upright crosses. He was doing that more often now that the Good Doctor walked by. Maybe it was the birds. They had stopped being such a bother.

From my father, I learned that the Good Doctor's grave was an empty one. It had no body. The only remarkable thing about it was the knot of hemlock my father could never seem to weed no matter how many hours he spent tending to the gravesite. Whatever that hemlock had stuck its roots into must've been more persuasive than the bone and stone which surrounded it. My father's steel trowel often stabbed and pried at the thick, weedy heart, but even the faint suggestion of a root was enough to revive the weed. After a time, my father gave up, and the weeds wrapped themselves around the upright cross. They bloomed on the second day of October with white flowers as innocent as baby's breath.

I wondered if the Good Doctor knew that there was no body in that grave.

My father told me not to bother her. The local devil told me to have pity. I remember, he said to me, “This is hard for her. I know a lot of people in this town say she was born with an empty heart, and maybe that’s true, but you know, people’s hearts are like cups. You can’t give what no one ever poured into your own. She found one person to pour into her cup and now they’re gone. That’s a tragedy if ever I’ve known one.”

There was a somber pinch in his brow. Then he shrugged. The devil stopped by the graveyard semi-regularly, with a bundle of wisteria for the old grave at the back. Some people said it was the very first grave in the town, but there was no way of knowing if that was true, seeing as how the writing on it was worn away. I supposed we must’ve had the record tucked away somewhere, but where was the fun in that?

I tried to ask the devil about why he always came to see that grave, and why wisteria, but as was expected, he kept turning things around till I almost bought a used Chevy from him. I didn’t have a license, and in fact he told me several times he didn’t even *have* a used Chevy. Perhaps that’s the only way anyone would think about buying a used Chevy, just toying with the idea. He was good at that sort of thing, finding little holes and putting ideas through till people got all twisted up. It was no wonder people called him the devil.

“Hey, it’s not up to me how many people give up how much. Besides, if I were *really* the devil you would have bought the car, not almost bought the car. Anyway, at least they don’t call me boring,” he said. He looked a little less satisfied with that answer than usual, but then again, I was four years out of practice reading his various modes of dissatisfaction. About that time, my father decided to join me out on the porch for a bit, and the devil took that as his cue to leave.

My father stared out at the Good Doctor's upright cross. She had missed a week or so of mourning, and in her absence I wondered if she would ever return.

My books back at school would have wrote her into a more palatable mourning, something whose motivations were a little easier to read. It's the psychology of the thing you see, the interior subconscious present in the body's every forward shift.

I found that English likes to scratch at other discourses, drag it's nails along the skin of a foreign body of work, until the gritty, sometimes bloody, always piecemeal, surface breaks up-piled beneath its unfiled white shelves. Then English scrapes it out, plying the file, never a perfect or pristine removal. English likes to press the detritus, roll it between its fingers, all the while entertaining the delirium that this flakey mash, only substantial enough for sent, is the body, but the body bent. It is no such thing. Still, can't burry the smell, can't burry the air. And yet you can burry a grave without a body.

The Good Doctor liked to read histories to her grave more than anything else. It was true that she brought poetry and fiction, and sometimes newspaper clippings, but she seemed to like the histories the most. I watched her carries these thick, old, doorstops, and I wondered if they felt heavy. When I was in school, my books never felt heavy until I had walked just a little too far with them, and then it was as if a sly hand had suddenly slipped bricks into my bag. The Good Doctor only carried one book at a time, and she read with a slow, humorless drawl. As November crept into the foliage, and began to make the grass recede beneath the earth, the Good Doctor brought a thick red covered book. That day, she sat in front of her grave. She didn't walk. She just read.

There was a knock at my front window, a stranger to be let in, business to be let in, a world whose dead needed attending. My father got up at once.

Upon closer inspection, it was just a foolish bird. My father brought it inside anyways. He pressed his fingers against the sputtering jerks of the bird's body. I thought it was a robin, the red breast was maybe feathers. There was blood too. My father tried to hold it still long enough to set the neck and save it, and if he had been a doctor he might have known how to mend those tiny essential bones, but he tended to this town's deep plots, and his fingers ached from working the weeds out of the Good Doctor's consecrated plot.

It took him a long time to find a cardboard box. I thought he must've still had one of my old shoe boxes lying around. After all I grew through so many damned pairs. But no, it took him a long time to find a box. Maybe he had gotten clean when I was away. That would have just figured.

He buried the bird in an old hatbox. He found a smooth stone to mark the grave. Then he stood beneath the poplar tree in our yard and he put his hat in his hand. Across the graveyard, the Good Doctor kept reading her book. My father recited his scriptures. I would like to know, though I doubt I ever will, what made the Good Doctor move first. She put her thick, red bound, book on top of her grave. Her hand reached out, almost like she was going to brush along the white flowers that the hemlock breathed, but she didn't. She left that red book on the grave. I had never seen her leave flowers before, but then again the grave was mostly hemlock and flowers.

On the way out, the Good Doctor walked past my father and they exchanged parting pleasantries. Then my father joined me on the porch. He didn't go back inside when the sun fell. He stood out, wading past the potential fear of ghosts. He waded out among the weeds, and tombstones, and the far horizon, with his hand folded, and his forearms pressed against the rails of

our porch. My father went out into the dark body of the overarching sky dressed in his overalls, as he goes dressed to most things. I think I am proud of him for that.

When he came back, it was with a deep breath. His shoulders went up, and then he rocked back on his heels, and then, at last, he settled back down into his soles. He turned and he looked at me, and he asked me, “Are you happy?”

To this day, I don’t know if I was, but now I think I am.

When the sun came up the next day it was unseasonably warm, and the air was dead still. I amused myself by pretending that the hemlock on the Good Doctor’s grave had taken on various shapes, like I would have with clouds had there been any in the sky. The most convincing shape I found was that of a small child, curled around the upright cross. I was quite taken by my discovery, and I wondered briefly if there were a Rorschach test, or perhaps a dream guide, that might help me put meaning behind the image.

The Good Doctor arrived in the late afternoon. She draped a trench coat over one long arm, with the fastidious care of someone who is used to the weather misbehaving. As she neared the house my father came to stand on the porch. He leaned against the railing, and called out to her.

“Doctor, I was wondering if you would like to sit for coffee,” he said. She stopped walking long enough to side-eye me, and then my father.

“What do you want?” she asked with her low, flat drawl. My father shoved his hands into the pockets of his overalls. He was likely fussing with the pulled string in the pocket. I had meant to fix that for him.

“Well, you know. For people our age, funerals are a part of our culture. I had figured you might like to sit and talk for a bit. You never had a vigil,” he said.

Not a muscle on the Good Doctor’s face seemed to move as she stared back at my father. It seemed to me, in that fleeting moment, that the Good Doctor had become much like her grave: nothing but a slab of upright stone, and filled with the trappings of life none the less.

Then something burst. Whatever internal pressure kept her spine turgid and her chin lifted above the horizon line had fled in a cloud of invisible smoke and left her limp.

My father used to say that there is no such thing as a fear of ghosts. Oh, he believed with every chamber of his heart that souls left behind ghosts. He just didn’t think we should be scared. You see all spirits are merely a heart’s hope that the one they loved still bothers to love them. The Good Doctor did not strike me as the type of woman who would leave behind a ghost, but I suspected she harbored a small hope for them none the less.

“Alright,” she said. “I’ve been meaning to offer a proposition of sorts.” Her eyes flickered over to me, up and down, and then over to her upright grave. My father looked at me as well, and in his eyes I remembered the dark body of the overarching sky sitting overhead.

“I think could suffer it,” he said.

The Good Doctor walked back, tracing the outer rim of our wrap-around porch, and then took her time with the steps. “You should know, I’m not a doctor,” she said.

My father gave me a long look before sighing.

“I’m not much of a grave digger either,” he said, holding open the door. The Good Doctor gave me one last side eye, before she went inside.

I watched her upright grave, as over the horizon a blue sheet moved closer and closer, and closer still. My eyes could not make sense of how fast it moved, and so I saw it in stills. Here it swallowed up the fence, then the grave without a body, then the edge of my porch, and then the blue norther swallowed me up too.

THE COWBOY

His compass was cracked. North felt six feet underground.

It had been a couple hours since he put one horizon between himself and town.

That morning he had gotten up and fed Cleveland from the palm of his hand. She didn't much mind the twitching of his stiff fingers. He sat down and he washed her main and tail. Then he braided her tail in one thick black braid. It was tricky business with the third and second finger of his right hand still in such a state. But he had years of practice taking care of Cleveland, and her mother before her. He was just fine. After he was finished braiding, he ran an aimless brush over her coat until the horizon yawned, and coughed up the first phlegmy red indication of sunrise. Cleveland looked just like a prize pony. Maybe a bit skinnier.

Before he set out he remembered to check her shoes.

They were fine. The two of them weren't going far together, Cleveland would be alright.

He walked her around to the front of his old family farmhouse. Wasn't nobody there but him now. His family had been dairy farmers. That's often the way with folks who settle in with that kind of work. To be fair, he wasn't much there himself.

On the table he picked up an heirloom fork. Its middle tine was bent just a hair. He tried to even it out, but his fingers weren't quite small enough to get in between the other two tines, and tilt the middle one in the right direction. Instead he polished it with the tail of shirt and then tucked it in his back pocket.

Cleveland was waiting patiently for him outside. Together they went on over into town. The morning sun had seeped down through cracks in the clouds to sit like anxiety over the heart of the land. His dry spit caught in his throat as he neared the bar, and he coughed a few times in the hope that it'd clear up the heavy, narrow feeling of his throat. He had no such luck, and that urge to cough stayed with him. There was a post outside for Cleveland, and a little bucket by the door that he could fill for her.

He made sure there wasn't too much dust inside before he filled it, and set it before her.

"Be good girl," he told her, pulling her face between his hands. She shook him off, and stepped around in place, as was her habit when he got a low and serious tone in his voice. She had really never quite got comfortable with the way his voice dropped after puberty.

He gave her one last pat, before he turned back in the direction he came.

He began to walk. Cleveland's eyes, big and lacquered, watched him go.

He walked until his feet began to grow sore, and then until his leg ached from the joint of his hip to the heel of his foot, and then he walked farther still, until all the aching in his body had stopped, except for the ache in his fingers.

There was only a wide flat circle of land all around him, and cloudless blue day on top of him. His compass was cracked, but hell to the miles, he had no place to go. It all felt like hell besides.

He was alone with the miles. When he was younger he had read that the universe was expanding outwards from every point, and here that notion was real. Staring at the horizon seemed to make it grow ever farther away, though he knew that wasn't really true. Two and half hours to the east, by horse that is, and he'd find himself in home-sweet-home, where the river ran red during rainstorms, and the doctor was just a woman with a sewing needling and a strong stomach.

As he drew farther away from his home, a thin black line began to appear between the earth and the sky. He followed towards it, until the thin black line separated out from its liminal zone and took a standing shape of its own.

There were fence posts, few concentric, wobbling ovals, all the faint lines the color of planting soils. Between those protruding, upright stakes, were iron lines of twisty barbed wire. For some time, he had been wandering with only the intent that he would come to a place where he could wander no more, and be left to immortal sleep in the same wide world where he had found his living. Now he felt something, a high and tickling sensation down the back of his spine that was more intense by far than the stiff, choking feeling which had gagged him for so long.

Someone had put barbed wire across the last drive left open near town. The last one, and now they put their damned wire across it. Now, no soul could hope to lead their horse clear of the town unless he stuck to the asphalt intersections or had God's good grace, and Lazarus' luck.

The sight called within him a wild and exasperated rage. For miles and miles and miles and there was nothing, but then some miserable bastard had to go and cross up the only way out with

devil's rope. What in hell's name was there to protect? Rocks? Sand? Did they want the sand? He swore he could deliver all the sand in the world. Tufts of weedy, desert grass popped up on either side of the fence. All the tall grasses were north by at least ten miles or east by twenty, yet ruin stretched tight between stumpy wood posts still.

All this is to say, that he reckoned, all things being equally damned, he'd do something before he got around to his business. His hands were bare, and no part of his soul was so masochistic that he could stand to give the wires the pleasure of tearing apart the callouses he had worked the majority of his life to get. Instead he pulled his fork from his back pocket.

When things in town had settled, he had gone to the local devil and asked for a miracle that might at last cure the peculiar difficulties of his soul. The devil gave him that heirloom fork, and for the life of him, the Cowboy couldn't figure out what the damned thing was supposed to mean.

Maybe this was it. The devil's tools, the devil's rope.

He walked right on up to the wire and began to poke at it with the fork. He got some of it between the tines and then twisted this way and that, like his sheer wrath could turn the fence into unpleasant spaghetti.

No, this wasn't working.

He stopped to look around for some more efficient tool, and as he did, his eye caught a quick movement. A white cloud pulled itself up from the horizon, twisting and growing till it looked like you could beat iron on its surface. He only had time to whisper a soft, emphatic, "Shit," before the wind began whipping up loose dirt. The tall white clouds on the horizon fell upon the earth, rushing forward in a stiff, blue, wall. With it came a freezing air and deceptive darkness. A

faint sprinkling of rain pattered against his face, but by the looks of the sky, this blue norther had more serious rain coming. The available light told him it had be nearing dusk, but his watch said it was a quarter past three.

At least the watch wasn't busted. Still, what did he really need it for. He peeled it off his wrist and threw it, like Walter Johnson on the mound, at line of black wire. The band caught and flopped from the top down a few, until it caught near the bottom.

What he wouldn't do to get rid of that damned barbed wire.

When he was just a child, their corner of the world knew no barbed wire. He grew up, stepping from the sheer face of the world, into the heavy, cloistered sitting rooms and bars of tow, and then back out again. He kept no objects of keen sentiment, an anchorite on a prairie pilgrimage. Now they all held empty those things which once gave greatest heart to imagination. Black dirt and buffalo. Importunate sky, present always in a man's consciousness once he has tripped past the horizon line and found himself in a world so vast and blue, that there is no real time. It is only land lain flat beneath different shades of blue. Only the presence of he and his companions had carved out meaning beneath the blue. They passed careful cairns, standing as tall as a man. These works of wondrous, human art, the only reminder that their souls were not alone beneath the blue. Their skins, like the beat leather they road, stretched tight over their bodies, until they were biological mechanism, indistinguishable from the creatures they rode, and drove, and ate. Dark with sun, heavy with salt. Beat the thin line between the deep, saying plains and the wide, ambivalent desert.

Now clumsy hands turn out the soil now for stagnant seas of livestock, bound in by black lines of twisted metal. He was left a survivor among the river's heavy, wet, flotsam and the

elsewhere ambitions of strangers. He felt so old, though damn near all the towns folk called him a boy. He hadn't felt much like a boy since they buried his brother. Still, he rode with the other boys like fraternity had him dead to rights.

The rumbling clouds thudded above him with the same reverberations as a heavy drum. Each high-piled cloud seemed to track a different strike, the physical place where some monstrous hammer had carved sound out of the sky.

Thick, heavy rain drops began to polka dot the earth. His spit caught in his throat still. Soon the red dirt was awash with rain falling too quickly to sink, and he had nowhere to go for cover but back the way he came, back towards the city.

God damned barbwire, god damned, god damned barbed wire, god damn.

A crack of light was born against the tumultuous darkness, like his mother's embroidery on the hem of his brother's resting suit. Except this was gold, and woven by God's unsteady hand, and as soon as awareness of it dawned, the sky devoured it again.

There was no cover. Only the city over his shoulder could give him cover. He had walked for miles away from it, miles and miles and miles. All things, being equally damnable, he supposed that he was done walking for now.

The fork in his hand reminded him that he was still owed a miracle. It was small, and the second tine was bent a little bit.

Here it was.

It was white. White like Angel had never seen before, a kind of all-encompassing brightness that didn't seem so much a color, as the absolute overpowering presence of a power his mind couldn't see.

...

He had seen a man kicked in the back of the head once by a furious wild horse, white faced and molted grey. A man of over six feet and two hundred pounds went down, limp as a rag doll. When he woke up he was laughing and laughing and laughing. That was now they knew the kick did something to his head. He said he saw god.

If the man had seen God, he imagined what kind of life he must've had to live. The Cowboy felt that powerful tremor light up the back of his skull. It was almost easier to picture it was a horse, and this was all a natural, fleeting moment, before he would wake up again.

The pain took sight from his eyes, and his memories fled the pain, dancing, here and there in his subconscious.

First was of his brother long, and thin, and dark against the heavy blue that hung above them. He looked like a natural extension of the roof's pitched point, a body born from the place that had housed him. It was just this, his brother, standing, and then he heard someone shout his name.

And in a slow, elastic movement, he watched the long arm of one of the other boys whip out, before his wrist flicked and the baseball in his hand uncurled from his fingertips. It turned over itself in the free air. The red yarn tumbled out and around, over and over, through the dirt-

worn cowhide as it rolled into the boy's thick gloved hand. The ball sunk into the leather, like a stone in molasses, and the Cowboy had found himself breathless.

His ears were ringing. Would his lungs move again?

There were two girls, one in a long linen skirt that'd be no good to play with, and the other in a thin little sundress. The folds of the fabric curled against and between her legs when the wind blew up from the river. He had flicked her hem up as she passed. Of course she yelped and went as red as the dirt. But her friend. He remembered the girl in the long linen skirt with her shiny gold bobby curls and something in the look of her eye. He had looked a rattler in the eye once, as he awoke on his sleeping pad on early morning. There was no distinct, serpentine coil of its body in dawn's somber shadow. There was only the earth, the thin shiver of desert grasses, the lumpy odd-born rocks scattered around, the nascent curve of the loose dirt as wind pushed and pulled across it's body, and the eyes of the snake. He heard its body shiver, but he lay propped on his side, nearly nose to nose with his own reflection in the snake's eyes. No quickness of his body could save him. It slithered on past.

The girl in the linen skirt put a hand on her friend's shoulder, and then drew her fingers down the girl's arm till their fingers intertwined. So not friends.

She looked at him real long, real slow. Enough that his buddy had stopped snickering too. She turned away.

He couldn't shake the feeling, the eyes.

Couldn't seem to die.

He remembered hearing a song, that low throaty croon “Oh baby, it’s a long way down to the bottom of the river,” that was what had called him down to the river. He had heard that song before, was so sure he had heard that song before.

...

His head was still ringing when his body caught up with his mind. A sound followed so closely with that brightness. He felt it in the shaking of his bones. His bones would not stop shaking, nor the earth, nor his chest. The force of sound knocked the breath from his chest, and rocked his seizing body till was lain on the earth, unable to move. The last of his voice was only a gurgle in the rushing, muddy, water that poured from the heavens above and across the inconsequential tilt of the earth. The earth beneath him sought to shake itself apart, and something smelled of burning sand.

Lightning.

He could not move his body.

Then thunder.

He could not move his body.

He could not—

A body, seen only through shadowed eyes bend down to look at his face. He had only been conscious enough hear it mutter “We are miles from deep water,” in the voice of a stranger before it stepped over his body, over towards *Words Words Words*.

He had no voice to call out. Only thick, dark, river water dribbled from his lips and pooled against the cracked concrete.

He had fought against that water, clawed it out of his throat, but it was seeped in his lungs. He babbled with wet lips, black water running from him, yet the river wouldn't take him.

God help him, he didn't drown. He couldn't seem to drown.

Where was the air? Why could the desert not take this water from him at last?

Why, where was he climbing, how could the water have him still? Still, when there was gritty sand between his seizing teeth?

Gasping, clawing hand over hand, his fingers curled into stiff linen, his body sunk. A boot came swift to break his fingers. The twitching, stiff, useless things, couldn't pull him back up. His mouth filled with thick, black, river water as he screamed. Oh he screamed. He screamed until there was nothing left and then he breathed in and still there was nothing left. Even after he had clawed, hand over hand with those useless, twitching fingers, onto the banks of the low river, and he had gasped, he had felt no air. Even after he had clawed, hand over hand with those useless, twitching fingers, from the banks of the low river to town with the prayer that someone would find him, someone please.

He could not breath as the Stranger muttered "We are miles from deep water."

The river ran from his lips, and he could not put words to how little he could breathe. Thick, rotting, river water stuck in his lungs, in his throat. The water dribbled from between his lips all the time though he breathed in, he breathed in . . .

. . .

The air came to him. It rushed down to the tips of his fingers and stretched out his gnarled fingers. His fingers returned to their crooked state with a slow, elastic, curve, like the slow recoil of a pitcher's arm.

He started up at the blue aftermath and it stared back at him with a wide innocent face that denied any knowledge of the storm that had just past. Hell had seemed to reach into his soul and find it wanting.

The last of his body's electric tension bled out from his shoulders, and his head lolled to the side. The barbed wire fence was curled and smoking.

Some memory of the lightning was held unseen by his mind. Two tails of electricity, a bolt that struck with only half strength. In his hand, the middle tine of his heirloom spoon was straight. The barbed wire showed it's bow in the ugly, wretched curl. The cowboy bore no scars.

A bolt diverged in the sky, and the heavy rains had left him unflooded.

The cowboy began to laugh. It started out huffy. His uncertain lungs were not yet sure they could spare the air, but when no black water came from between his lips, when the river did not pass over his eyes, he body began to jerk. His chest jumped and puffed. He laughed, so loud so bright that it hurt and soon he found that he had run out of air again, but he could not stop.

God damned barbwire, god damned, god damned barbed wire, god damn.

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