"STEALING DREAMS" AND OTHER STORIES

Elise Matthews

Thesis Prepared for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

December 2014

APPROVED:

John Tait, Major Professor
Miroslav Penkov, Committee Member
Bruce Bond, Committee Member
David Holdeman, Chair of the Department of English
Mark Wardell, Dean of Toulouse Graduate School

Matthews, Elise. "Stealing Dreams" and Other Stories. Master of Arts (English - Creative Writing), December 2014, 67 pp., bibliography, 12 titles.

The critical preface, "Learning to Break the Rules" discusses workshop rules as guidelines, as well as how and why I learned to break them. The creative portion of this thesis is made up of eight short stories: "The Many Incarnations of Blazer Chief," "Anna's Monsters," "The Pecan Tree's Daughter," "When the Seas Emptied," "The Umbrella Thief," "How to Forget," "Fracture," and "Stealing Dreams."

Copyright 2014

by

Elise Matthews

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The story "The Many Incarnations of Blazer Chief" originally appeared in *Jersey Devil Press*. The story "When the Seas Emptied" originally appeared in *Necessary Fiction*. The story "Fracture" originally appeared in *Hobart*.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS iii

PART I CRITICAL PREFACE: LEARNING TO BREAK THE RULES 1

Works Cited 15

PART II SHORT STORIES 17

The Many Incarnations of Blazer Chief 18

Anna's Monsters 29

The Pecan Tree's Daughter 37

When the Seas Emptied 42

The Umbrella Thief 49

How to Forget 55

Fracture 58

Stealing Dreams 61

PART I

CRITICAL PREFACE: LEARNING TO BREAK THE RULES

The stories collected here are all experiments, each a way for me to try out different techniques, to learn how to break the rules. They're all practice. Each one began because I wanted to figure something out, to find what felt right, what felt honest, what felt like me. I have discovered my voice while writing these stories, discovered what kind of writer I want to be—*have* to be.

After spending five years of college immersed in literature (mostly medieval literature), I only just truly discovered contemporary literature in grad school, discovered how much important, beautiful writing is happening right now. How did I miss it before? Reading this writing has opened up my own writing in a way I didn't think possible. When I started this program, I never would have guessed I could or would ever write the kinds of things I'm writing right now. I knew I was creative and intelligent and had something meaningful to say, but I didn't know how to say it or that I could say it like this. I didn't think I'd so quickly jump into the conversation of boundaries, of genre, of what is literary. Or that I'd be pushing against the established rules so fast. I didn't expect to seek the cutting edge—though I'm still far from it.

In my undergraduate workshops, I learned and accepted the rules for literary writing I was taught. I understood their value and did my best to follow them because I'm a rules person (I was the kid who always insisted everyone follow board game rules *exactly*, no deviations or made-up rules; the rulebook was the ultimate authority). These writing rules included clichés like "show don't tell" and "write what you know." The rules also emphasized realism over anything that could be considered genre writing or anything outside of "real" experience. While genre fiction—fantasy, science fiction, etc.—was technically allowed, it was discouraged because it

wasn't usually literary[1]. I learned that the literary short story had a specific form—that my stories should be somewhere around 15 to 25 pages with as much of it done in-scene as possible, that there must be a climax and all the other story elements I learned in high school English. I learned how fiction was different, separate, from poetry and nonfiction, was shown the lines that separated them. This all made me comfortable. I could follow rules. I was good at it. I wanted rules, especially rules that would make me a good writer.

I defended all of these rules in workshop when other students complained of their limitations, their unfairness. I knew they had a purpose, were important, not arbitrary. But all of my stories that followed these rules felt very flat. There wasn't any life to them. Karen Russell discusses a similar experience in her *Tin House* craft essay, "Engineering Impossible Architectures":

> [T]he more I tried to portray the "real" world, to whip married adults into plausible dramas and describe the makes and models of their cars, the more these stories felt like a stiff, self-conscious ventriloquy of reality. . . . I was trying so hard to get the facts rights that these stories lacked any effervescent sense of creation, discovery, something bubbling under the surface. (199)

This is how my stories felt to me—contrived and one-dimensional—because I was forcing them into a specific, unnatural[2] shape. They weren't going anywhere, didn't have anywhere to go. Only one story felt like it had any "heart" (to quote other students in workshop) to it, and that story had a bizarre supernatural element to it—while still being straight realism—because it was about my

---

[1] I later found that there was a lot of overlap between genre fiction and literary fiction, but keeping them separate was one of these initial rules. Later, I learned that literary fiction, for a lot of writers, just meant character-driven fiction, and lots of genre fiction is also character-driven and artful.

[2] Here, I mean unnatural for these particular stories, not unnatural for fiction in a more general sense. It was personally unnatural.

fundamentalist religious upbringing. I wanted to lean into that bizarreness, the non-realness, but I didn't know how at first.

In graduate workshops, I came to realize that the workshop rules were not so much strict rules as they were loose guidelines[3], a foundation upon which we were to build. These guidelines/rules worked for some writers, but other writers needed to break them, to move beyond them—and doing so was perfectly acceptable if there was a reason for it, if the broken rule accomplished something. But even though the rules were really just a place to start, moving away from them made me nervous. I didn't know where to begin because I'd taken the rules so seriously up until that point and had really ingrained them in my writing process. In workshop, we read writers who broke the rules so beautifully and skillfully—George Saunders, for instance—but I was still nervous. I needed something to shake all of that up.

Enter the workshop assignment that spawned my first slipstream[4] story, "The Many Incarnations of Blazer Chief." It was the first story that spilled out of me almost faster than I could write it, the first story that carried meaning outside of what I intentionally put into it, the first story that had life in it. It also later became my first publication. In "The Many Incarnations," I finally stopped playing by the rules I'd clung to because those rules weren't working for me, especially for this story. First, I tried so many versions that followed the rules,

---

[3] Though these guidelines still *felt* like rules to me for awhile, which is why I continue to refer to them as rules throughout this essay.

[4] Here, I use "slipstream" as a bit of a catch-all that includes speculative fiction, magical realism, fabulist fiction, new weird—any kind of fiction that falls between the bounds of literary realism and mainstream genre fiction, fiction that is literary but uses fantastic, supernatural, or other non-real elements like fantasy and science fiction while being distinctly separate from those genres. See Harrington. See also Rheaume. See also Sterling.

and they all failed before I could get halfway through a first draft. It was the most infuriating story I'd ever attempted, and I hated the assignment.

The assignment, in short, was to write a first-person-plural story set in rural Texas in the 1950s, the conflict being the loss of a dog—each of these elements had been given to me by other students in workshop. I'd always followed the "write what you know" routine, and I didn't know any of this, so I had no idea how to write it. I didn't know the 1950s or how it felt to lose a dog or how to narrate from a collective voice. I barely knew rural Texas. And then I read "Frost Mountain Picnic Massacre" by Seth Fried. I'd picked up a bundle of speculative fiction issues from the One Story booth at AWP 2013 a few weeks before, and this story happened to be in it. It uses a first-person-plural point of view, and it's just weird enough that it got me thinking outside the proverbial box. Not only did it show me exactly how to manage a collective voice—it's done so expertly in this story, and I'd never seen that before, that I could remember anyway—but it also showed me how just a little bit of weirdness, just a little push against realness, can work, how it can open up a story. So I tried it. "The Many Incarnations" is mostly realistic. It's set in the real world, and the collective narrator, a late generation of a rural town, feels very real.

There's just a little bit of magical realism[5] at the story's center: Blazer Chief, a dog who dies and comes back many times, never looking quite the same but always recognizable, to watch over the tiny town of Megargel, Texas. I found that this magical, or non-real, element allowed me to do things on the page I hadn't been able to do before. Russell argues that these kinds of stories "have an extraordinary power: to draw out the deep strangeness of what we too often dismiss as 'the everyday'" (199). Writing like this allowed me to approach the real world

[5] While some scholars claim that magical realism exists only in Latin America, where it originated, many other scholars argue that magical realism is now an "international movement." See Zamora and Faris.

from a different angle and write about very real things in a way that meant something outside of myself—by which I mean the meaning of this story came about organically rather than a meaning that I intended or held inside myself and tried to force onto the story. When people read it and shared their thoughts with me, I learned they'd found meaning in it that I hadn't been aware of. This was an exciting first for me. I'd started the story just writing about a town losing a dog, but when it was finished, I found that the story was also about belief and southern Protestantism and community and the distance—both emotional and physical—between generations. The story was alive and had things to say that I couldn't see until it unfolded.

I learned so much while writing this story. I'd never tried anything even close to magical realism or slipstream. I'd certainly never tried any points of view other than first person singular or a close third. I'd never written a story without heavy scene work. I'd never written anything that didn't happen in the current day. "Write what you know" became the last thing I wanted to do. I wanted more of the satisfaction I got from writing "The Many Incarnations." I wanted so much more of it, needed more of it. I no longer cared about the rules that had previously been so important to me, not if this was the result of breaking them.

But I was afraid this was a one-off thing. I wasn't convinced I could do it again. The story had come out of a very specific assignment, and I worried I'd always need an assignment like that to write something comparable. And writing "The Many Incarnations" felt trance-like, as if I was channeling something outside myself; I didn't think I could make that happen again. I hadn't experienced it before that story and had never understood other writers who described writing that way, in a sort of trance. I'd always felt very much in control of my characters and their stories, and that was part of the problem. Only recently did I find this reflected so perfectly by another writer. In *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, Anne Lamott discusses

authorial control: "If you're lost in the forest, let the horse find the way home. You have to stop directing, because you will only get in the way" (114). This is what I'd found with "The Many Incarnations"; I had to stop being in control, had to stop directing, because I was getting in the way of my characters and their stories. I wasn't listening to them; I was telling them what to do. In addition to being a rule person—maybe *because* I'm a rule person—it's my nature to be very bossy, and I'd had to be bossy in order to make my stories fit the rules I'd clung to up until this point. Writing this story showed me how much better a story could be when I shut up and just listened, when I stepped back and let the story unfold on its own, let the characters do what they wanted, needed, to do.

Controlled writing is safe writing. In following the rules, I had written safe stories, stories that I thought the Almighty Workshop wanted. But workshop didn't actually want safe, lifeless stories, I discovered—and I didn't either. The next story I wrote, "Stealing Dreams," ran significantly farther from the old rules. This story got much weirder and less safe, and I let the story happen as it would, didn't make it do what I wanted it to do. When I started it, I thought it was going in an entirely different direction than where it ended up, and I'm glad I didn't force it into something it wasn't. In this story, the narrator, a young woman, becomes a literal muse when she begins a relationship with a failed writer. She transfers her dreams, which are developed stories and not typical dreams, to him through sex. I wrote it during the summer when I had no deadlines or pressure from workshop. I'd never had so much fun writing a first draft.

Writing "Stealing Dreams" freed me up even more. I wanted to keep pushing against what felt safe and normal. These first two stories were completely fictional, by which I mean that they weren't rooted in my life, that there wasn't anything autobiographical in them, at least not intentionally. To me, "write what you know" meant I was writing about my life and

fictionalizing it. I'd tried many times to write about something that happened to me but to push those events or characteristics on a character whom I tried really hard to make distinctly not-me. As previously stated, these stories felt forced and inauthentic. Like I wasn't letting the characters be themselves or do what they wanted to do. I was making them me while also making them not-me. That's very confusing for them. And for me. No wonder it never worked.

After tasting the possibilities of writing non-real fiction, I wondered if I could attempt autobiographical fiction again. I'd found myself fascinated, obsessed even, with the increasingly blurry lines between genres—not just between literary fiction and genre fiction, but also between fiction and poetry and nonfiction. I'd found, as Margot Singer and Nicole Walker argue, that "Genres, in sum, are not fixed categories with clear-cut boundaries, but constellations of rhetorical modes and formal structures grounded in varying degrees of fact. Genres are rooted in convention. They are also shape-shifters, in a continual state of flux" (4). I desperately wanted to blur the genre lines in my own work even further, to allow it to shape-shift. Or, I wanted to inhabit the space between these lines, the space where my writing could be all of these and none of them. I wondered if the techniques I was learning would allow me to finally write about my life in a way that would work, if I could successfully combine nonfiction, which I also loved to write, with fiction. I hadn't been able to follow the "write what you know" rule successfully before, but I wanted to see if I could.

The first attempt at this was "How to Forget," which is about a breakup I went through in 2012. I'd never been able to write about that breakup before, though I'd tried many times. Instead of making myself the point-of-view character, I decided to tell my ex's side of the story, or rather to tell his story to him (as it's in second person), to tell *our* story as he if he could magically forget all of it if he just drove fast enough away from the climax, the end of the relationship,

which is where the story opens. That magical element drives the plot; it let me tell the story backwards, which made it feel fresh and less *my* story, made it feel like its own story. But it also let me tell my story honestly, every detail true. This story was another lesson for me in point-of-view as well. By shifting the focus from me to him, I was able to write about an event in my life without it feeling melodramatic and one-sided—two words which describe all my previous attempts at writing about my experiences. This technique worked for me, and I'll keep it in my back pocket for the future, to see if it fixes other attempts, this shift in focus.

My second experiment with autobiographical fiction was "Fracture," also about a breakup, but this one more recent: the summer of 2013 (written in the fall of 2013). This was another event I felt compelled to write about, even though it was so recent, as part of the healing process. Writing is therapy for me, even though "writing is not therapy" tends to be another workshop rule[6]. Writing helps my brain process things. Writing is so much more than therapy for me, of course—it's also art and breath and sustenance—but therapy is one of its functions as well. My therapy-writing has usually been separate from my art-writing, but it all came together in one piece here. This time, I wrote from my point of view. The first draft was pure nonfiction, and my unsuccessful attempts to keep it from being nonfiction, to make it fiction, mostly just made it very nebulous, not a real story. It didn't work as just a page of my rambling about this guy's broken promises and lies. There wasn't anything new there, nothing interesting. Just whining.

Reading Kevin Brockmeier's story, "The Ceiling," really helped me figure out how to make this story work. Brockmeier's story, at its heart, is about a couple who becomes estranged.

---

[6] Yet another rule that I eventually learned was less a rule than a guideline, meant to keep writing from being solely a personal exercise, something irrelevant to anyone but the writer, a rule to remind writers that their work must hold some greater significance, something other readers can connect to.

It's a familiar narrative, but the presence of a ceiling slowly descending over a town really pushes everything to another level. So I took a cue from him and added a magical-realist element to my story: a magical bowl full of words—all of the couple's promises to one another and their feelings. The bowl is just there when they meet, unexplained, unsurprising to anyone. I had this tiny image in my head of this bowl, so I threw it in and blew it up, and suddenly the story came alive. It stopped being about me and the guy I dated. The couple in the story jumped off the page and started telling me their own story. They could do this because the story no longer existed in the same world I live in, so the narrator couldn't be me anymore, not completely. The image drove the story, made the characters their own people. It wasn't just about them anymore, though. It was about words and how they mean things and how those meanings, even good meanings, can hurt. Words can add up and pile on and press in and explode and destroy. I decided I did like "write what you know," after all—sometimes.

Then I wrote another piece rooted in my experience: "Anna's Monsters." When I started it, it was about me as a child and my relationship with fear, but in revision, Anna took over. I have always had a number of irrational fears, many because of OCD, and in 2013, I started facing them, as many as I could. I mean head on. I stopped running from them, started chasing after them, and it was life changing. I needed to write about it. But instead of letting a character face all these fears over the course of a year as an adult, I let a little girl face all her fears in one day. I thought it would be a happy story, like mine has been. But no. Anna quickly made it clear to me that her story wouldn't be so simple—and thank god because that would have been boring. Her fears turn out to be well-founded rather than rational. When she turns to face them and refuses to continue living in fear, they make clear how real they are and how afraid of them she should be. She is undone by choosing bravery.

In all of these stories, I began writing them straight and let the non-real part reveal itself to me as the story unfolded. Sometimes that part showed up quickly in the first draft, and other times it didn't come in until revisions. I was growing more and more comfortable with slipstream, though, so it didn't surprise me when my next story started with the weird, non-real element instead of starting grounded. "When the Seas Emptied" started as a dream, just a quick image before I awoke: sharks disappearing into thin air, like bubbles popping. That was it. This story began as an image-driven story, but as I wrote, the couple I placed at the story's center, took over and started telling me their story—and I was getting better at listening to characters when they spoke to me. The image moved to the background, driving the larger plot, but this couple had their own story that became the real heart of the story. I never meant for "When the Seas Emptied" to be about marriage and the challenges couples face in trying to become parents. I thought the story was about disappearing sharks. I think if I'd tried to write about marriage (etc.), I would have failed. But since I started writing about sharks, the real story was allowed to happen organically. Writing this story, I learned how to get out of the way even earlier on in the writing process, how to listen more and direct less. Writing was becoming more and more fun and felt less and less like work.

"The Umbrella Thief" also started as an image from a dream: a driverless car ambling into the ocean. I wrote the image down, and it amounted to a one-page scene. That scene sat in a document on my computer for some weeks before I did anything with it. When I brought it back out and tried to find a character who witnessed this odd event, who could tell a larger story, a very strong voice started speaking to me. This first-person narrator is so far removed from me, from my experience, though. Her voice is so strong in my head, but I struggle to understand her, which has made this story the biggest challenge I've faced so far. I can only hear parts of her

story, fragments, and have struggled to put them together, to find their connections. This process is like pulling teeth. More work than fun. But for some reason, I haven't been able to give up on her or the ghost car just yet.

While I was writing all of these stories, I was also discovering and reading writers who wrote the kinds of things I wanted to write. I fell in love with Susan Steinberg's strong, punching voice; Kate Bernheimer's fairy tales; the very bizarre, vivid imagery in Karen Russell's stories; the very magic-as-normal tone of George Saunders; the power in Lydia Davis's economy and concision. These writers were teaching me how to do the things I wanted to do, how to write what I wanted to write.

Bernheimer's fairy tales, in particular, got into my head. I'd discovered her work through the journal she edits, *Fairy Tale Review*. It immediately became my favorite journal, in part because it was so different from all the other journals I'd looked at. I knew I wanted to publish in *Fairy Tale Review* eventually, and that meant I needed to figure out how to write a fairy tale. "Anna's Monsters" was my first attempt at a fairy tale, but it ended up being something completely different. The story didn't fit the form. For a number of reasons, I didn't attempt to write a fairy tale again for some time. Slipstream that leaned more toward magical realism seemed to be where my writing was most comfortable, and I didn't want to force it to do something else if it didn't want to.

Then I came across Bernheimer's *Tin House* craft essay, "Fairy Tale is Form, Form is Fairy Tale," where she details various fairy tale techniques. This essay gave me the tools I needed to return to the form and try again, and it made me think about a story—one that I just couldn't make work—in a new way. So this story, "The Pecan Tree's Daughter," became a fairy tale. I used Bernheimer's techniques to re-craft the story: "flatness, abstraction, intuitive logic,

and normalized magic" (64). All of these techniques were appealing to me, and I was already using some of them in other stories—abstraction more than anything else:

> Fairy tales rely on abstraction for their effect. Not many particular, illustrative details are given. The things in fairy tales are described with open language: Lovely. Dead. Beautiful. . . . Here we have another very exciting violation: this time of ye olde "show don't tell' rule. Fairy tales tell; they do not often show. (Bernheimer 67)

That fairy tales privilege telling over showing really excited me because my style of writing—what I've found feels most natural, the narrative voices that make sense to me—tends to be heavy on the telling, little to no showing. It's not that I don't know how to show; I can write a perfectly good scene when asked to. But I don't care for writing scenes; they don't usually feel right in my stories. I've struggled with that because "show don't tell" is the one rule I'd been taught was a bigger deal than the other rules/guidelines. "Show don't tell" was an actual rule. But I couldn't shake that it felt wrong a lot of the time, like I was making my stories do something they didn't want to do.

Bernheimer's permission, encouragement even, to tell gave me confidence in the voice I'd found; it finally felt okay not to push my stories to show. And really, I felt that my stories did show in their telling, just didn't show through scenes. My telling could show better, and it's a skill I tend to continue to hone because I know it needs some work, but it's something worth pursuing. In his *Tin House* essay, "The Telling That Shows," Peter Rock argues that "[a]ll first-person narrators show as they tell, disporting themselves—their obsessions, their blindnesses, their misapprehensions, their insecurities" (230). I write a lot of different points of view—I try to let the story decide who needs to tell the story—but I do have a particular fondness for writing first-person narration. When I write in first person, my inclination to tell is stronger than with third. With these stories—"The Many Incarnations," "Fracture," "When the Seas Emptied," "Stealing Dreams," and "The Umbrella Thief"—I like to let the voice, rather than the action,

drive the story: "Telling closes the distance between the story and the reader; to me, this means that the story speaks—it tells itself, attempting to make sense of itself—and things can become intimate" (Rock 230). This feels so natural, makes sense to me. I also like to read stories that mostly tell, particularly through first-person narrators. The abstraction doesn't distance me from the text, rather it pulls me in because it feels like the narrator is sitting with me in a coffee shop, telling me her story. This style can be conversational, which does feel intimate when done successfully.

Though "The Pecan Tree's Daughter" uses a third-person narrator, as traditional fairy tales do, the form requires telling. I'd originally written it in first person, and it felt too melodramatic. The narrator pitied herself too much—much as my early attempts at nonfictional fiction were full of self-pity. I tried to get away from that tone but couldn't manage to with that point of view. Because the character did pity herself, felt too victimized to move beyond self-pity. Shifting to a third person narrator and telling the story flatly removed this feeling, and the story started to work.

Using telling to show means more pressure on the language, on each sentence, particularly in flash pieces—like "Fracture" and "How to Forget"—where a lot must be packed into a small space. I learned more about how to do this from poetry than from other fiction. I was already using images to drive or to start my stories, but poetry showed me how to make it work better, how to blow these images up, how to push on them, to make them work harder. Poetry also made me more aware of my choice of words. I have a lot to learn in this regard, am only just starting, but I pay a lot more attention now to my choice of words, spend more time considering the syntax and melody of my stories, read them aloud to get the sound right. Telling with rhythm,

for me, really jumps off the page, has as much life as a tightly written scene. The telling can become musical, can sing, in a way that showing doesn't do for me.

This collection is a jumping off point, a beginning. I no longer feel like the rules are rules. I learned so much about writing from them and learned even more breaking them, moving beyond them. I've found my voice and want to sharpen it, to move beyond these experiments. I want my fiction to be more than fiction. I want the honesty of nonfiction and the music of poetry. Carole Maso's similar desires resonate so much with me: "In my new work I want music, meditation, narrative, philosophy, more—and all at once" (29). I want my prose to live and to be true—whatever that means for any given story—and to sing.

Works Cited

Bernheimer, Kate. "Fairy Tale is Form, Form is Fairy Tale." *Writer's Notebook*. Ed. Tin House. Portland: Tin House Books, 2009. 61-73. Print.

Brockmeier, Kevin. "The Ceiling." *The O. Henry Prize Stories*. Ed. Dave Eggers, Joyce Carol Oates, and Colson Whitehead. New York: Anchor Books, 2002. 5-16. Print.

Fried, Seth. "Frost Mountain Picnic Massacre." *One Story* 8.124 (2009). Print.

Harrington, Jim. "Slipstream: The Convergence of Speculative Fiction and Literary Fiction Streams." *Flash Fiction Chronicles*. Every Day Publishing, 28 July 2010. Web. 3 Oct. 2014. <http://www.everydayfiction.com/flashfictionblog/slipstream/>.

Lamott, Anne. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995. Print.

Maso, Carole. "Notes of a Lyric Artist Working in Prose: A Lifelong Conversation with Myself Entered Midway." *Break Every Rule: Essays on Language, Longing, & Moments of Desire*. Washington D.C.: Counterpoint, 2000. 21-54. Print.

Rock, Peter. "The Telling That Shows: Some Provocations from Inside the Story." *Writer's Notebook*. Ed. Tin House. Portland: Tin House Books, 2009. 227-240. Print.

Rheaume, Lauren. "Seeking Slipstream: A List of Resources." *The Review Review*. N.p., n.d. Web. 3 Oct. 2014. <http://www.thereviewreview.net/publishing-tips/seeking-slipstream-list-resources>.

Russell, Karen. "Engineering Impossible Architectures." *Writer's Notebook II*. Ed. Tin House. Portland: Tin House Books, 2012. 197-216. Print.

Singer, Margot, and Nicole Walker, eds. "Introduction." *Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. 1-7. Print.

Sterling, Bruce. "Slipstream 2." *Science Fiction Studies* 38.1 (2011): 6-10. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 3 Oct. 2014.

Zamora, Lois P., and Wendy B. Faris, eds. *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995. Print.

PART II

SHORT STORIES

The Many Incarnations of Blazer Chief[7]

Blazer Chief, a black Labrador, pranced down Cedar Street in late April, 1948, and set up court in the abandoned farmhouse a few yards from the mayor's house. At night he slept inside the house, and during the day he'd sit for hours on the rickety front porch and watch us. Chief never begged for anything, but we began leaving him gifts—mostly leftovers when we could spare them. Before long, those of us who were farmers brought him scraps from our slaughters. We put a bucket at the old well next to the house and filled it each morning.

It was hard to say what drew us to Chief. We all had dogs—working dogs on the farms and pets for the rest of us. Dogs were about as ordinary as people in Megargel, Texas. Maybe it was his stillness, his demeanor. It wasn't that he demanded our respect and attention but that he had earned both somehow without doing anything other than being there.

Maybe it was the timing. Things were finally settling down after the war. We'd had time to adjust to normal life and start building families again. We were figuring out who we were. He came to us with his head held high and looked as optimistic as we felt, so we took it for a sign—from God or whomever—that we were on the right path. And we wanted to show that we understood and appreciated, so Chief became Megargel's dog.

Our dogs accepted Chief's elevated status. From the moment he entered town, the other dogs all deferred to him. None challenged him, even the most alpha among them. Our dogs also stopped challenging us when Chief was nearby. They stopped barking for no reason. He calmed them somehow.

---

[7]This entire chapter is reproduced from *Jersey Devil Press* 54 (2014). Web. 30 Sept. 2014. <http://www.jerseydevilpress.com/?page_id=6078>.

We had no choice but to be devoted to this miraculous dog, and that was more than fine with us.

Every day, Chief stood sentry, as if we were his to protect. There was talk of the mayor adopting him so he'd have a better house to live in and since we'd been planning on tearing that old farmhouse down the next summer. But it was decided that Chief belonged to all of us and none of us, and he'd chosen the old farmhouse, so we wouldn't make him move.

That didn't stop the mayor—who thought owning Chief would lend him extra support in future elections—from trying to lure the dog. He'd leave treats on the edge of his property, and when Chief went to retrieve them, the mayor would offer something even more enticing from his doorway. But Chief never went into any houses but his own.

Chief remained poised when approached and never growled, so our children quickly attached themselves to him. When school let out, they went straight to his house. In the summer, when they finished all of their chores each day, it was to Chief's house they ran. We had a difficult time calling them home for dinner. They liked to play games in his yard, read, or just lie in the grass and watch clouds.

When the temperature dropped that winter, we gave Chief blankets, as many as we could spare. Before the first freeze, we worried the blankets wouldn't be enough, so we went to work on his house. We made sure the old pot-belly stove worked and insulated that room as best we could. We brought all his blankets into that room, installed a large cat hole in the door to accommodate his size, and left the door closed to keep out as much weather as possible. Each night, we built a fire in the stove, and Chief slept in the pile of blankets in front of it. The fire never lasted all night, but it lasted long enough.

When winter turned to spring, we thought he might get bored with us and leave, but he seemed at home and content. We took back the blankets, washed them, and stored them for the next year, should he need them. When he'd been with us almost a year, we organized a parade in his honor and, on the anniversary of his arrival, marched down the main drag, right past his house. Chief's tail wagged excitedly for the entire procession, but he was otherwise still as usual.

On his second anniversary, we organized another parade, and it became a Megargel tradition after that. We felt we owed it to him, though we weren't entirely sure why.

A few days before his tenth anniversary, he wasn't out of his house when the paper boy rode by. And even later, when we took our children to school and went to work, Chief still wasn’t out. We got worried when we went outside to eat lunch and he still hadn't appeared. The porch looked wrong without him.

Late that afternoon, the mayor took it upon himself to investigate. We gathered outside the farmhouse. He returned to us carrying a tragedy. Chief was dead in his arms, and one of his hind legs was rotting faster than the rest of his body; the fur had fallen away, and his flesh was black. We found two puncture marks on his right thigh and figured that a rattlesnake had bitten him but had no way of knowing for sure. We found no snakes.

We didn't want to believe it. Some wanted to call for the vet in the next town over, but Chief was gone. But still, we prayed. We held a candlelight vigil that night and promised God we'd be better people if He'd just give Chief back to us. We swore to love our neighbors and never to miss church.

The next day, when Chief still lay dead on his porch, reason abandoned us. We'd left his body there, too caught up in our denial. Unable to avoid reality any longer, anger took us. The

mayor declared we had an infestation of snakes, the devil's tools, so we went hunting. We killed every snake we could find—harmless or no. They were all the enemy.

The town council banned snakes as pets next, though most owners had already killed their pet snakes. The Pentecostal church also killed their snakes—something the council had been trying to get them to do for years. All the churches in town drove the snake massacre. Snakes were Satan incarnate. Our bloodlust was insatiable. Armed with shovels and shotguns, we spent full days combing the fields outside of town. We forgot about our jobs and other responsibilities.

After a few days, we couldn't find any more. We'd succeeded in purifying our town. We convened for a town hall meeting that night to discuss ceasing the hunt. Someone mentioned Chief's parade would have been the following day. We cried and congratulated ourselves that we'd obliterated the vile reptiles before his anniversary. We felt he would have been proud of us—perhaps was proud of us, wherever he was.

Chief's farmhouse was declared a historical monument, and we passed a motion to erect a sign out front to preserve Chief's memory. We also decided to hold a midnight vigil instead of a parade on the eve of his anniversary every year.

We brought tents and set up camp in what used to be Chief's yard. This first vigil needed to be more than just a few people standing around holding candles, we felt. So at midnight we lit our candles and sang songs and prayed and cried some more. Sometime in the early hours of the morning, we retired to our tents and slept.

When we emerged in the morning, the sun just clearing the horizon, we noticed something walking down the road towards us. It was on the edge of town, so it took a while before we could see that it was a puppy—a yellow Labrador puppy. As it neared our camp, it

began trotting and hopping a bit. It walked right past us, up the porch steps, and sat right where Chief had always sat. It was calm, and its eyes seemed familiar and old.

"It's Chief!" one of our kids said.

"Nuh-uh," another said. "This one's yellow."

"Is so." There was no denying his eyes.

Some of us fainted; others cried even more. The roughest of our men had long since given up any pretext of resisting tears. We'd become a very weepy town in just a few days.

The puppy remained still as we all crowded around to examine him. We decided he was Chief and proceeded to shower him with affection, which he accepted without losing his poise.

Chief as a puppy seemed appropriate. Our faith was young. We'd known he was special but hadn't understood to what extent. We wondered at his return, probably more dumbstruck even than our children. It seemed silly and cliché, but everything seemed brighter and—more possible. Like amazing things really could happen if we just wanted them bad enough. Rules had been broken, and we thirsted to understand.

When we recovered from the shock of this second miracle, we realized we still had time to put on our annual parade, so we scrambled to throw it together. New Chief oversaw the parade with grace and what looked like approval. The mayor declared the next week to be set aside for celebration. We hadn't been to work in as long, but our jobs would have to wait. We continued our campout for the duration of the festivities.

Then things went back to normal, for the most part. We left gifts for New Chief when we could and reinstated the annual parade. Eventually, we stopped calling him New Chief, and when he was full grown, we forgot he wasn't the original Chief, forgot Chief had originally been black. In our minds, we'd only ever had one dog.

But some things had changed. In the days following his return, the town council proposed plans to promote education: grants for school supplies and increases in teacher benefits, programs to involve the whole community, outreach to families who struggled and were unable to sufficiently support their children's education. All measures passed, and no one protested them. We had a responsibility to provide our children with futures even better than our present. The town council also helped found organizations to assist families who had elderly and mentally ill members whose care was a burden.

When harvest season came, the farmers whose crops had failed weren't left empty handed. Those who had shared with those who had not. Instead of hoarding excess, we made sure everyone had enough. We held ourselves to a higher standard than we had before. We thought, maybe if we did enough good, we could keep him forever this time.

Somewhere in our enthusiasm to earn Chief and to prove ourselves worthy of him, though, we took advantage of what we'd been given. Chief was the face of everything. The town council needed public support for some proposal? Then they said it was Chief approved. The schools needed to motivate kids to do their homework? Chief specifically requested they do their part; the teachers read letters he'd written to their classes. Blood drive? Food drive? Chief wanted us to give. He endorsed political campaigns and local businesses. His image appeared on posters all over town. And everyone in town wanted a picture with him—the young, aspiring photographer who'd offered his services for such a task made a small fortune within just a few weeks.

In 1975, we lost Chief again to another snake bite, and we remembered the tragedy that struck us in 1959, something we'd quickly forgotten. But we knew what to do this time. Again,

we rid the area of snakes and told God we were sorry we'd gotten lazy and let them back into our town. We swore never to slack in this again if He would just grant us another miracle.

We didn't cancel the parade because we believed, but we did dig our tents out of storage and held another vigil. This time, our children were grown and had their own children. They begged us to stay home, said we were too old to camp this time, said they would stand in our places. We refused. We couldn't be anywhere but Chief's yard that night.

We were all up before sunrise the next morning, each of us eager to spot Chief first. We wondered what color he'd be this time. One of our grand children saw him first, but as he neared, our faith faltered. This dog wasn't the right shade of any color we expected—more of a rusty grey. His nose was too narrow, his tail too bushy, and his ears stood up. Our children clutched their children and began to flee, but we waited. We wanted to see its eyes.

This was a young coyote, but its eyes were dark and old—Chief's eyes again. Our children watched from a distance, but we stayed to greet him as he approached. He walked past us to the porch, ignoring the food still out from breakfast. When he sat, our children recognized him and returned, though hesitantly.

We wondered at his transformation but quickly accepted it. We didn't care that he looked different, so long as we had him again.

There was talk every few years about erecting a statue in Chief's honor, but no one could agree on what it should look like. Some of us were for making it in the likeness of the original, especially since that statue would also look like the second version. Others liked the current version of him better for a statue, said this version of Chief was more Texan, local. Still others

argued for every version of him, envisioning the yard full of statues of different breeds in the future. Instead, we settled on portraits, one for every incarnation.

We watched Chief die again in 1983. As before, we found him with flesh quickly rotting around the bite and again found no snake in or around the house. We'd been careful about keeping them out of town this time, hoping we could avoid Chief's death altogether, but we went hunting anyway and found nothing.

We thought maybe a scorpion, but the Olney vet confirmed snake. We swept the town again. We raided the Pentecostal church. We searched the rooms of our grandchildren who had taken to wearing black clothes and makeup and hair. Surely they were harboring Satan's servants.

Yet no snakes were found. Chief's anniversary approached, and this time, we had nothing to show for ourselves. Would he return? Would he know we'd tried to avenge him? Would God? Would He accept our failed attempts? We called a town meeting to discuss it.

"Is there anything else we can do?" some of us asked.

"How can we prove ourselves if we can't kill his killers?" others asked.

"Have we failed?" still others asked.

We were frantic and confused, and the new, younger mayor was unsure of how to calm us. He'd been born after the first Chief arrived in town. Like his peers, he didn't know life without Chief, and he was afraid. How would we explain to our grandchildren that the now legendary dog would no longer oversee or join their play? What else would bring the town together like he had?

We threw all of our hope and effort into the vigil. We began a full day before the anniversary. Pastors gave sermons on God's faithfulness to provide. Musicians sang songs—hymns for God and ballads about Chief. We set up a shrine on his porch: the portraits, photos of us sitting or playing with him, his favorite blanket, and a stuffed bear our second graders had given him when he first showed up. The bear was in sad condition from years of use: eyeless and missing an ear and covered in as much fur as the blanket.

This time we were too old to camp all night. We joined our children and grandchildren at dawn to welcome Chief once more. We found more people than we'd left the night before. Visitors from nearby towns who had heard stories had come to wait with us.

This time, when an old sheepdog entered town, head held high, no one questioned or retreated. We knew before we could see his eyes that it was Chief. The crowd parted when he reached us, but he didn't immediately go to the porch this time. Instead, he sat in front of the old mayor's wheelchair, looked him in the eye, and licked the old man's hand before taking his historical spot once again.

That was the last incarnation of Chief we saw. On our death beds, we made our children swear to continue to care for Chief and to teach their children to do the same. And they did, for the most part, because they had been there when Chief first arrived. Their kids loved Chief but didn't understand why their parents made such a big deal about it every year, why they got so upset when he died. They knew he was coming back, so why cry over his dead body? And was a parade really necessary? For a dog? But they still continued our traditions without fail, moved by the stories they'd heard from us.

They passed these stories on to their children who cared even less for all the pomp required to honor a scrappy-looking dog who did nothing but sit on an old porch and watch people all day. They liked to play with him when they were young, but when they grew up, they tired of caring for him. They wanted dogs of their own, ones that slept in their beds and loved only them. And some of them thought they should be allowed to have pet snakes because snakes in terrariums didn't actually hurt anyone. They didn't like having to check on Chief every morning during the winter to make sure his space heater hadn't tipped over and shut off the night before. They argued over whose turn it was to fill his water bucket each week and who needed to wash his blankets. They got greedy and stopped bringing him food from their homes, instead opting to buy cheap dog food in bulk and have it shipped in with other supplies for the local farms.

Worse, they quit taking care of each other. They built an old folk's home where they could send their elderly, where someone else would care for them. The state cut funding for schools, and instead of finding a way to keep our programs going, instead of finding a way to keep our schools better than the rest, they fired teachers and increased class sizes. They shipped their mentally ill off to institutions in Dallas and rarely visited. Successful farmers sold everything they didn't need for their families, leaving nothing for the community, nothing to share with those whose crops had failed that year. And when the less fortunate complained about being abandoned, the fortunate called them lazy, entitled, said it wasn't the job of those who succeeded to feed the rest.

After their parents had passed on—yes, surrounded by their children, but after long sicknesses in lonely hospitals with infrequent visits—the descendants canceled the parade indefinitely, and when Chief died, only a few people showed up for the vigil. The next morning,

he—this time a scraggly little mutt—arrived well after sunrise and already looked old, older than we'd ever seen him. He sat for as long as he could each day on the porch, but by the time everyone got off work, he had lain down.

When that Chief died only a year later, no one noticed his absence for a few days, and no one could find time or motivation to spend the night outside his house once they did figure out he was gone. No one got up in the morning to greet the next Chief, which was just as well because no dogs came up the main drag that whole day, or the next. No dog ever returned to the old farmhouse, and no one noticed.

Eventually, they wanted to tear the house down because the new mayor wanted to build a big, new house on the property. The town council had to vote on removing the historical marker status from the house, and they passed the motion unanimously. No trace of Chief remained where he had once lived.

They put his portraits into storage when they renovated the town hall and never brought them back out once renovations were finished. Their children didn't care for stories about a dog that supposedly never really died because he had died and hadn't come back. To them, Chief was only a myth, a local tall tale. They all knew that dogs couldn't really be reincarnated, that one dog could not have possibly watched over the town for more than half a century. Once something died, it was just dead. Period. And because they believed it, it was true.

Anna's Monsters

Anna was afraid. Monsters had lurked on the edges of her existence for as long as she could remember. They lived in her closet and under her bed and at her school in dark corners. She had never seen them, of course, but felt what they looked like. She didn't know how else to explain it. She saw them so clearly in her mind that it didn't feel imagined at all.

Most of them were your typical monsters: large with matted fur and sharp teeth, or scaly and slithery. One was a floating black orb the size of a basketball. Like a black hole, it could suck up anything—her, her parents, their house, the whole world—into itself, and then whatever it swallowed wouldn't exist anymore. It'd be like it never existed at all. This monster often threatened to swallow her if she ever disobeyed.

Another one looked like a man but with empty holes where his eyes should be—holes all the way through the back of his head. When he visited her at night, she'd shut her eyes extra tight and try to be somewhere else until he was gone. He only wanted her silence.

One monster had leprosy. Or it was leprosy. Just chunks of rotten flesh barely strung together, a little breaking off with each motion. Another was a swarm of bugs with a single mind. Like a hive. It was crunchy and crawly and made Anna's spine shiver.

The monsters wanted her to stay away from everyone. She wasn't to speak to or play with other kids—except when the monsters changed their minds and made her socialize, which usually ended in embarrassment. They offered no explanation to their inconsistencies.

There were always little tasks they wanted her to perform, things that drew weird looks from kids at school and even from her parents. Sometimes she wouldn't respond to questions grown ups asked her because the monsters had ordered her to count the ceiling or floor tiles. If she gave them the wrong number, something really bad would happen to her. Questions from

teachers often made her lose count, and she'd have to start over, which made her teachers impatient and also made the monsters impatient, which made Anna more afraid. This exchange often made her cry.

What drew the most attention from other people was the monster's order than Anna spin once clockwise every time the floor changed—like from tile to carpet. Even Mom and Dad told her it was weird and that she should cut it out. But Anna didn't have a choice.

The monsters could also take her if she got too dirty, so she was always clean. At recess, she was careful not to touch the ground or anything by accident, usually opting to just stand still away from everyone else for the entirety of recess. She always hummed the happy birthday song when washing her hands to make sure she didn't stop too soon. Showers always had to be extra hot and burned her skin a little. And her room was always perfectly clean because the monsters had more places to hide when it was messy. They thrived on disorder.

She knew they were also waiting for her to stop paying attention just long enough for them to pounce. That's why Anna was vigilant, always thinking about them, always watching for the attack, always mindful. The smallest misstep would be her undoing.

In addition to the ever-present monsters, Anna was afraid of weird food, like broccoli, and school and doctors and shots and bugs and mirrors and darkness—and things she couldn't always remember she was afraid of until they were in front of her. Too long a list to keep straight. There were always new things to fear.

When she was in third grade, Mom and Dad said it was time for Anna to sleep alone, in her room. They knew she would be brave, that everything would be just fine, so Anna tried to be brave but felt sure the monsters would get her as soon as she drifted to sleep. So she didn't sleep.

After a few days of sleeplessness, Anna started turning on the bedroom light once she thought her parents were asleep. As long as the light was on, the monsters couldn't get near her, another rule, and she was able to sleep. But one morning, when she awoke, the light was off, and she panicked. She ran to Dad and told him, but he said that he'd turned it off in the middle of the night. When she asked him to leave it on next time, he said that she needed to learn to sleep in the dark, that sleeping with the light on wasn't healthy or normal for a girl her age. Mom chimed in and told Dad to just be glad Anna wasn't sleeping with them anymore

The monsters even followed Anna to school. In sixth grade, she was sitting at the end of her class's lunch table one day, where she sat every day, where she could usually go unnoticed. The room itself had its own quiet behind the sounds of kids talking and laughing, but then there was a loud whooshing sound just above Anna's head, just past the panels in the ceiling. Her hand stopped midair on the way to her open mouth, a spoonful of applesauce frozen, and she stared up, her eyes wide. The whoosh was followed by what sounded like a strong, steady wind rushing through the ceiling, and Anna knew it was the monsters up there talking, their whispers loud but unintelligible. There was an intermittent clicking, too, which meant they were walking around, their sharp claws tapping on the ceiling. Anna felt their breath rush past her neck, sending shivers down her spine. She was still within their reach.

Anna kept staring at the ceiling until the whispers ceased suddenly and all that could be heard was the chattering of the other kids. She realized her hand was still frozen and quickly looked around to see if the other kids had noticed. When she saw everyone occupied in conversation, she went back to eating and tried to act normal as she listened for the monsters to return.

She raised her hand and told Mrs. Snodgrass, the lunch monitor, what happened because the monsters had wanted her to, which didn't make sense, but she'd learned not to ask questions. The teacher had said it was just the air conditioning and that Anna was being silly, that she was too old for such nonsense. But Anna knew better. The monsters were always close, always waiting. Mrs. Snodgrass asked Becky, who was sitting nearest Anna but leaning away from her as much as she could, if she'd heard any monsters around. A practiced look of concern crossed Becky's face, and she said, "No, Mrs. Snodgrass. I don't believe in monsters. But I'll make sure Anna is okay."

Anna cringed as Mrs. Snodgrass smiled and thanked Becky for being such a good friend. She knew that Becky's sweetness would sour the moment Mrs. Snodgrass's back was turned. And she was right. Becky scowled at Anna and turned to tell her friends in exaggerated detail what had just transpired. This wasn't gossip to be whispered. No, the whole table was Becky's audience for this tale. Anna's whole body felt like it was blushing, and her eyes stayed glued to her lunch until it was time to go back to class.

Because she was so afraid of everything, the kids at school never bored of torturing her. Anna learned that if she was quiet, sometimes they'd leave her alone. And usually the monsters wanted her to be quiet, so it worked out. Her teachers worried, though, that something must be wrong at home. They said it wasn't normal for a sixth grader to be so quiet and antisocial, and they worried at her odd behaviors like the spinning and frequent hand washing. Anna had to start seeing the school counselor who asked her lots of questions about Mom and Dad and if anything bad was happening to her, if anyone was hurting her at home.

She told him about the monsters, that she was just doing what she was told, that something bad would happen if she disobeyed them. This confession drew a satisfied sigh from the counselor; he had a diagnosis. Everything was clear now.

"The monsters are just a manifestation, dear. It's just your mind's way of making sense of these anxieties. They aren't real. It's okay to disobey them. Nothing bad will happen."

He met with her parents and recommended they get medication from their family doctor. Mom and Dad were so relieved to have an answer, a solution to Anna's problems.

But the monsters told Anna not to take the medication, so when her parents left out her pill every morning, she flushed it down the toilet.

One day in class, Miss Richards called on Anna to answer a question even though Anna hadn't raised her hand. Anna froze. She knew the answer but had been ordered not to say it. Everyone in the class was watching her, and if she said the wrong thing, they'd all laugh at her, and if she said the right thing, then the teacher might call on her again. But if she didn't say something soon, they'd all think she was stupid and would laugh at her anyway, and she just didn't know what to do. Her face, one moment frozen in terror, eyes wide and still, collapsed and let loose what she'd been holding back. She covered her face with her hands, but everyone saw.

Phillip, the boy who sat next to Anna, said, "There goes Baby Anna again."

Miss Richards scolded him to be quiet and said that calling people names wasn't nice. Phillip wasn't done, though.

"But she is a baby. Only babies cry all the time like that. Look at her. She's a baby. Little Baby Anna. Do you need your binky? Do you need a bottle?" He stuck his thumb in his mouth

and made very loud sucking noises, alternating that with pretending to cry. The other kids were rolling with laughter, and some had taken up the fake crying.

"That's enough, everyone," Miss Richards said. "Phillip, apologize to Anna, and go to the principal's office."

Phillip left the room without so much as looking at Anna. It didn't matter that he was in trouble; it didn't help. The other kids were all looking at Anna and trying not to laugh anymore. They didn't want to join Phillip, but she knew they were just waiting to call her a baby again when the teacher wasn't around. Anna tried to stop crying, but her eyes still filled with tears, and her cheeks and neck burned. Miss Richards sent her to the counselor's office with instructions to return to class once she calmed down.

The kids kept calling her a baby that day and the next and the next, sometimes even when she was trying to hide within silence. Baby Anna. They asked if Baby Anna wanted her blanket—or her pacifier, her bottle, her mommy, etc. She didn't want to be a baby and started to wonder if maybe the other kids were right, wondered if the grown ups were right, too. What if she really was just being a baby, imagining the monsters? So she decided to stop being afraid, to swallow the pill.

She told Mom and Dad at breakfast, and they said they were proud of their very brave daughter. They exchanged knowing smiles full of hope and also doubt. When she got to school, Anna told her counselor and teachers she wouldn't need counseling anymore. They smiled, too, and hoped she was right because they didn't know what else to do with her. She raised her hand in class. She talked to the other kids at lunch, and they let Anna play with them at recess since she was no longer acting like a baby. They didn't say mean things behind her back all day. One

girl, Lisa, even said she was glad Anna wasn't scared anymore because Anna was kind of fun. The teachers told each other Anna seemed like a normal kid for once—and thank God.

At dinner, Anna said she wanted to try broccoli this time, and that seemed to make Mom happy. Mom hoped that maybe Anna really had stopped being afraid, like maybe she could finally have a normal daughter, like maybe Anna would be okay.

Anna had stopped being afraid for a whole day, and nothing bad had happened, and everyone was happy about it, especially Anna.

At bedtime, she hesitated at the light switch for a moment, but Dad squeezed her shoulder and said again that he was proud of her. Re-fueled with confidence, she turned off the light, kissed Dad goodnight, and climbed into bed.

After Dad closed the door, Anna said, "You can't scare me anymore, darkness. I don't believe in your monsters. You can't hurt me. I am not afraid." She looked around at her empty, quiet room and was glad that she was no longer a baby. She breathed easily, steadily, deeply. Both her body and mind were relaxed in a way she'd never experienced before. Sleep came quickly because she knew everything would be okay.

Except.

It's midnight, and Anna just woke up. The darkness is heavy and presses down on her chest, and it sounds like something in her closet is rattling, maybe, very lightly. She breathes, in and out, in and out, and reminds herself that monsters aren't real, that her medication has probably just worn off, that it will take more than one day to cure her. She closes her eyes and tries to go back to sleep, but her bed starts to shake, just a little at first, and it grows until she has to grip the mattress to keep from being thrown off, and the rattling gets louder, the closet door vibrating so

violently it seems as though it might rip from its hinges, and something is scratching and tapping at her window, the glass surely unable to hold; the man without eyes climbs onto her bed, and the orb of nothingness expands, sucking in her teddy bear first, then her blanket, then the room itself, leaving only her on her bed, floating in a void; a voice, deep and gravelly, booms from beneath the bed and tells her that she *should* be afraid, that they'll make her afraid again, and a scaly hand grabs her foot and begins to pull her off the bed, and she knows she should be afraid, but she's not, and she says so, even as they take her.

The Pecan Tree's Daughter

Once there was a girl whose mother left her outside an orphanage just after sunset, when all the children and workers were safe inside for the night. The woman knocked at the door before running off, but at that moment, no one was near the door to hear the knock, and the girl was such a quiet baby. She had never cried, even when she was born.

She gave no signal of her presence the whole night, so she was not found until the next morning when the orphanage's cook when out for his morning smoke. The girl was so quiet that he almost stepped on her. He started when he looked up and saw an aged pecan that had not been there the day before. Its branches pressed against the nursery window.

This suspicious man thought the baby cursed and decided to throw her in the river, quiet as she was, but the cleaning woman came out before he could. This woman saw the tree as a sign that the baby was blessed and took her inside to join the other abandoned babies.

The tree's branches scraped the nursery window every time the wind blew, even with the slightest breeze. This made all the babies cry except the girl, quiet as ever. Instead, her eyes would grow heavy, and then she'd fall into the deepest sleep. The scraping was a lullaby.

When she was old enough to hear the theories of the cook and the cleaning woman regarding the tree, the girl chose to think of the tree as her protector rather than a curse. The rest of her life was cursed enough. She spent as much time beneath the tree as she could—reading, drawing, staring at clouds. It was an escape from the worry that followed her the rest of the time. But the girl did not eat the tree's pecans, for even she was wary of the magic that they might contain.

The orphanage mothers, as the workers there insisted they be called, offered nothing like a real mother's comfort to the children there, and so secretly, the girl called them the not-mothers. She had come to think of the tree as her true mother, as it provided her the comfort the not-mothers would—or could—not. She thought her mother's spirit must live inside the tree.

The not-mothers told all the children that their parents had left them because they were bad, and they beat the children when they cried or fought or otherwise misbehaved. The girl never cried, but sometimes that made the not-mothers even more mad, so they'd beat her anyway. She tried not to misbehave or fight, but the other children had made a game of trying to make her cry. They were determined that one of them could make her do it. And so sometimes she'd strike back, which always earned her a strong blow from one of the not-mothers.

When the girl was eight years old, she was placed with a farmer and his wife who lived just outside the town and sometimes took care of some of the orphans. The couple had never been able to have children of their own but loved having children in their home. At least that's what they told the orphanage. The girl soon found that they had no love for children, only love for a clean house and well-kept farm. The farmer was a drunk and couldn't manage any of the work himself for all his stumbling and blurred vision. The farmer's wife refused to work because she knew that hard work destroyed beauty and youth, which were more important to her than anything. The children had plenty of youth to spare, besides, so she made them do all the chores required to keep the farm going and the house clean.

The couple made the children work long hours and didn't feed them much—only a slice of bread in the morning and a bowl of grits at night. It wasn't any worse than what they ate at the orphanage, just less. They were beaten here, too, just like in the orphanage. But the girl's

protective tree-mother was now far away, so she acted as badly as she could: she started fights rather than be forced into them and refused to do her chores. The farmer and his wife quickly sent her back but not before telling her what a worthless, unlovable child she was. Still, she shed no tears.

The not-mothers received her coldly, resenting her for coming back to them so soon, another body to care for in the endless stream of needy bodies in their lives. They treated her with even more hardness than before, but she didn't care because she had her tree-mother back.

The girl grew up beneath the branches of her tree-mother. It remained a safe place. No one came near the tree because the other children and the not-mothers all agreed with the cook that the tree was something to be feared. They talked of having it cut down, but none of the men in the town would touch it with an ax, for fear of being cursed as well. Only squirrels ate the pecans.

But eventually, the girl grew too old to stay in the orphanage, and the not-mothers arranged for her to marry the farmer's nephew. The farmer's nephew was not well-loved by the parents of girls in the town; they didn't trust him. So he asked the farmer to help him wed an orphan girl who didn't have better prospects.

The girl—a woman now—did not want to leave her tree-mother again, but the not-mothers took her while she was sleeping to the home of the nephew, and the two were married the next morning. The nephew loved her silence. It meant he could do anything he pleased and never hear about it or worry about anyone else hearing of it. Never a complaint, never a tear.

The nephew, having been warned of her terrible behavior on the farm years before, kept her locked in a room most of the time, bringing her out only to eat or to amuse him. She tried to

escape once but was then tied to her bed for a week following the attempt. She did not fight after that because she knew that she would never be allowed to return to the orphanage, to her tree-mother, and so resigned herself to this new life.

One night, when the nephew's friends were over and they were all drunk, the nephew brought the girl from her room and told her she must drink with them. The liquor quickly made her dizzy, so before long she lay down on the floor, hoping just to sleep. She was not yet asleep, though, when the nephew and his friends began talking about her, about how her clothes had fallen and revealed parts of her she usually kept covered. Just before she finally fell asleep, she felt a rough hand being rough. And then another.

The girl awoke the next morning to the nephew yelling, calling her words she'd heard her whole life, blaming her for what he and his friends had done. He chased her out of the house with his belt.

Though she was naked, she ran all the way to the orphanage, to her tree-mother. She stood before it and felt what was growing inside her. For the first time, she cried. The tree's branches shook above her, and some of its leaves and pecans fell. The girl ate a pecan and reached out toward the branches. She gripped them tightly and wished her tree-mother could truly protect her from the world. Her feet sank into the earth. Her skin thickened and hardened over every wound and every bruise, even those deep within.

Now, two trees stand next to the orphanage, one much taller and older than the other. The trees' branches are all entwined, their trunks close, roots overlapping. Some say the younger tree is the girl because it appeared the day the girl disappeared. Some say she left town, that the tree is a

coincidence. Some say the old tree split in a storm, which is why they're so close to each other. The cook thinks the younger tree is a new curse, one left by the girl he believed bewitched, and now the cleaning woman agrees with him. No one will go near either tree. No children sit beneath them, as the girl once did. No one gathers their fallen pecans.

When the Seas Emptied[8]

In June, marine biologists panicked on the news. Disappearing sharks. Only a couple at first, ones tagged for research. But then they noticed it was wider spread. Populations off the coast of Florida were dropping.

When they decided the other local populations—fish and such—were normal and stable, they expanded their search, looked up and down the coast and found more sharks missing with no clear reason why.

Pseudoscientists threw theories around on cable news. The fish were bad, inedible. The sharks had just migrated away from our coast. It was global warming. It wasn't global warming, but it was climate change, the other direction. It was pollution. It was over fishing. It was our fault. It wasn't our fault. It was God. It was the end times. Everyone should panic. Everyone should remain calm.

I watched the circus with amusement. My wife and I always made fun of the news together. Everything had to be crisis-level these days, had to excite. My wife, though, watched these reports with apprehension, as if the whole thing personally concerned her. I figured they were exaggerating the problem because it was a slow news month. No scandals, no elections, no kidnappings or murders. Just some missing sharks. It was silly and unimportant.

More important was the baby we were trying for. The baby we were determined would live. The first hadn't.

---

[8] This entire chapter is reproduced from *Necessary Fiction* (2014). Web. 30 Sept. 2014. <http://necessaryfiction.com/stories/EliseMatthewsWhentheSeasEmptied>.

A month into the media's obsession with the shark fiasco, my wife was late. I gripped her hands while we waited for the pregnancy test. We'd done this so many times before. I was ready for the empty disappointment again. Hopeful but also guarding against unbridled hope, the hope that destroys when not realized, the hope that burns from within and leaves nothing but ashes. She seemed unusually unperturbed. It was annoying.

The news was on in the background. More shark coverage. Speculation on the upcoming Shark Week, whether it should still happen with so many sharks missing. Sure, the programming was shot way ahead of time, but they felt it sent the wrong message or something. They decided to raise money for research that whole week instead of run ads.

They were explaining how we could get involved when the timer went off. My wife was too wrapped up in the discussion on TV to look at the stick, so I grabbed it from her.

Positive.

I showed it to her, waved it in front of her face to pull her away from the TV. I wanted us to have a moment. She smiled at me, said she knew, pushed the test away, and went back to watching. I tried to draw her away again, tried to pull her into me, but she shoved me off, saying she didn't want to miss anything important. I said *this* was important. No reply. I tried to have my own moment, but the moment was gone.

Three months later, just when the leaves had started to change, we threw a dinner party to tell our closest friends. Congratulations were exchanged, and her best friend cried. We were nervous, and they were nervous for us, but we were all hopeful this one would make it. For once, the TV was off, and it was about us and our baby. My wife let me be part of it, let herself be part of it.

That night, as we readied for bed, high on excitement, the news informed us that there was no longer any trace of any sharks anywhere, that experts were declaring all 470 species of sharks extinct. I chuckled and said that at least our child would grow up without fear of shark attack when we went to the beach. I said sharks would be the Bigfoot of the seas, the new Loch Ness monster but all over the globe. There would be periodic sightings but never any real proof. My wife shot me a frown, her eyes empty of their usual laughter, and said I shouldn't be so flippant about such a serious environmental issue. How could I not be worried about 470 species—all the sharks on the planet—going completely extinct in just four months? And not even just regular extinct but *disappeared-into-thin-air extinct*. She said I needed to grow up because I was going to be a father soon.

But we'd always joked about these kinds of stories, the things that were probably big deals but seemed too out there to be true. This was something she should have laughed about with me, but every joke I made was met with reproach.

She'd begun obsessing about our roles, as humans, in this mass extinction. Spent all her time online trying to make people understand that this was our fault. It was all she cared about.

I told her that even if it *was* our fault, it was still happening. We couldn't stop it. And anyway, it was still nature doing its own thing. We couldn't really control it one way or another. Nature had clearly just decided that these species were done and no longer had a place here on Earth. There was no way we could have caused something this big, this strange. Nature was bigger than us.

In January, my wife was happy to finally look pregnant and wear maternity clothes instead of just baggy clothes. Wrapped in layers and scarves, her stomach bulged, and she'd never been

more beautiful. But we didn't yet know the sex of our baby. Something had been wrong with the ultrasound machine. When the doctor consulted the image, he said it couldn't be right, that it looked like my wife's womb was full of eggs—thousands of eggs. He ordered some tests and sent us home, said it was clearly a mistake and he'd see us in a week. I didn't worry because it was absurd. Thousands of eggs wasn't possible.

We didn't go back. My wife smiled and said it made sense, it was right. I told her *she* didn't make sense. She said everything would be fine, that nature was working itself out. I had no idea what she meant. She was becoming less and less familiar. A gulf had formed and widened between us a little more each day.

That night on the news, we learned that other marine species had begun disappearing, too. All kids of fish. Dolphins and whales. Sea turtles. Crabs and lobsters and shrimp. The oceans were evacuating, but no one knew why or where the animals were going. They just disappeared. Like the sharks. As she watched, my wife rubbed her swollen belly and told me again that everything would be fine. For the first time, I wondered if this even had anything to do with me or if I was just a tourist.

In April, amid the constant downpour that should have welcomed our baby, my wife did not go into labor. We hadn't been to the doctor since the first ultrasound. I told her we should see a doctor, ask him about inducing, but she wanted to do it naturally, said she didn't want to induce, said there was no reason to see a doctor, said it wasn't time yet. So we waited.

She'd taken to spending hours locked in the bathroom, soaking in the tub, refusing my offers of food and company. Often, she wouldn't even answer when I knocked. I always wondered if she'd fallen asleep and hoped she was just ignoring me.

By this time, the oceans were almost empty. The only life left were corals and anemones, plants, and algae. Researchers told us that even microscopic life had disappeared. And the little life that was left was on its way out, too.

I wondered what it meant to bring a child into a world with empty oceans. But people the world over were still having babies even as we spoke, so maybe it didn't mean anything. My wife said it wouldn't matter, that it meant something but not what I thought. She said her children wouldn't have empty oceans because they would fill the oceans. Child, I said. I said, You mean *our* child. I worried that if the baby didn't come soon, my wife's mind would be gone for good.

My wife was still insisting on letting it happen naturally that summer, though the July heat had her drenched in sweat. I worried that it would never happen, but she said she knew it would, that she could feel it, that her baby was coming soon. She'd taken to spending her days at the beach, opting to drag her chair down to the water and let the waves wash over her legs, sometimes reaching her waist. She took bottled water with her, emptied it onto the sand, and refilled it with sea water to drink. She felt connected, like she was supposed to be there, like it was important. I worried as much as ever, so I sat with her when I could and tried to convince her to go home, told her none of this was healthy for the baby. But she said she had to be there when it happened, that it was the only way to fix everything.

Birds began congregating near her. First just local seagulls, probably hoping for handouts. When their natural food supply vanished, so did their secondary supply—food from beach-goers. People were spooked by the absence of marine life and no longer wanted to go near the oceans. My wife always had the entire beach to herself.

Every day there were more birds, different kinds. Grackles. Pigeons. Finches and sparrows. Hawks. Owls. They all sat away from her, watching. Still. Eerie. They were waiting for something.

I searched desperately for the real answer to why all marine life had disappeared. There had to be some scientific explanation, something that would convince her to give up this ridiculous insistence on staying near the ocean. Something to convince her this was crazy and had nothing to do with us. It wasn't her job to fix the problem; that wasn't something she could even begin to do. Our baby needed her to be realistic and responsible. I needed her to be.

I showed her statements from scientists who admitted they could find no proof that we had anything do with any of it. I brought her articles about the dangers of drinking sea water, of its effect on unborn babies. Articles about how filthy birds are and how many diseases they carry, how a large number of them become a significant health risk. Stories about women who insisted on giving birth at home, ended up with complications, and whose babies died. Horror stories about pregnancies allowed to go on too long. Pleas from doctors to come in; rants about how dangerous her avoidance of doctors had been.

I brought her all of these things, but her answer remained, "A mother knows."

On a Sunday in mid-July, my wife finally went into labor at the beach, and she refused to leave. No amount of begging on my part could convince her. She wouldn't even come away from the water's edge. I told her there was risk of infections, of losing our baby, of complications the hospital could take care of if only we went. She was immovable, unhearing, so I did all I could do: I knelt next to her and held her hand.

When she said it was coming, I moved between her legs to try to deliver our baby myself. My wife opened up. Instead of a crowning head, tiny eggs spilled out of her. Thousands of eggs,

just like the doctor said. As they left her, some broke open, revealing infant sharks and turtles and other sea animals. Most of the eggs, though, floated in the surf, waiting to be carried out, to hatch in the sea. I looked at my wife in awe. She *had* been carrying the answer this whole time; we'd created the answer.

Then the birds descended. My wife screamed as they scooped up our aquatic children. I tried to fight them off, keep them away. I flailed and swung and raged. My fist connected with feathers and flesh. But there were too many. They continued devouring everything that came out of her. I couldn't protect them all.

And then they were gone, had retreated back to their nests, bellies full.

My wife, tears still streaming down her face, asked me if anything survived, anything at all. I looked out at the ocean, where all of our children should have been, and saw the truth. I told her, "some."

The Umbrella Thief

I haven't been to the beach since the day I watched a ghost car drive into the ocean. When it happened, I was looking for a beach umbrella to jack from some idiot who'd left one unattended. Really, I was just going to borrow it. I never actually kept the umbrellas I took. I always left them on the beach when I went home.

No one ever seemed to mind. Except they probably did, but they rarely suspected me, even when they found me beneath their umbrellas. I'm a small white girl. I look like I come from money. I look innocent. The kind of white they trust. The kind they want to take care of. Or the kind they're a little afraid of. Because I look like them. Or because I don't look like them.

Sometimes I went to the beach on days I didn't have class. Some days I skipped class to go. I didn't really want to go to college, but my mom insisted, said she wanted me to have a better life than she had. But it wasn't really my thing. Not that I really had a thing. I mostly just wanted to hang out on the beach—a side effect of living on the Gulf Coast. When I couldn't deal with my mom or with school or a boyfriend or whatever, all I had to do was walk a few blocks to the beach where I could forget about everything for a few hours.

I liked to push the umbrellas deep into the sand, as far as I could get them, making a cave-like shadow to crawl back into. Usually I napped. Sometimes I read—if I found a book along with the umbrella, if the book looked halfway decent. When an umbrella's owners caught me with umbrella *and* book, I had to cut and run. My looks didn't get me out of thefts that obvious.

I only took umbrellas that were really plain, though, not easily identifiable. Blue tended to be the most popular color, so I always tried to get one of those. When it was just an umbrella, they always apologized, said they must have been mistaken, and wandered off embarrassed.

It got me off—getting away with it, being able to.

But it was one-night-stand kind of getting off.

I figured this power out when I was nine years old and my mom, who'd been single my whole life, married a guy with a daughter my age. I didn't think much of it except to be annoyed that I had to share—my things, my room, my friends, my mom. But my stepsister was okay, otherwise. She was someone to help stave off boredom the rest of that summer. I didn't hate her.

When school started, I realized my stepsister and I weren't the same because everyone treated her differently. I mean, I knew that we looked different, but I hadn't known that it mattered. At first, I thought they treated her differently because she was the new kid, but the teachers also treated her differently. Like sometimes she got in trouble for things that other kids—me included—did. And we all let it happen. Because why not, right? It was what we'd always wanted: a scapegoat, no consequences, freedom.

The other kids called her names like "spic" and "wetback." When I asked my mom what those names meant, she said they were dirty, terrible names and that I should never say them again, especially to my sister. She said I should stand up for her when anyone else said them.

Except she wasn't my sister. She was my stepsister. Not a *real* sister. So it wasn't my job the protect her. Maybe it was. But I was just a kid and was worried the other kids would turn on me. I definitely didn't tell them that she was my stepsister. No one had heard yet. I hadn't made a big deal about it or anything, and I'd told her not to because I wanted to see if she'd be cool before claiming her.

At first, she tried to get me to help her, asked me to tell the other kids to stop calling her names. But even when I ignored her, she kept asking me, in front of them. A couple of the smart

ones knew something was up. I didn't want them to call me those names, too, so I started using the names, louder than anyone else, especially when she was around. I knew my saying them hurt her more than when the other kids called her names, but I was too afraid not to. I had learned that the color of my skin offered some amount of protection, and I wasn't about to give that up.

I told her that if she told her dad or my mom, I'd have her dad deported. It was something I'd heard one kid saying, repeating something his dad had said: "We should turn these lazy spics in to the government and have them deported." I didn't really know what it meant at the time, but she always got scared when she heard that word, more scared than when we were calling her names. She stopped asking for my help. I learned later that her dad couldn't be deported anyway, so it was an empty threat, but its emptiness didn't make it less cruel.

My mom and her dad eventually split up. Probably because of me, though my mom swore it had nothing to do with me. I said I didn't care. I don't know if I meant it. I was glad to have my mom to myself again, though, glad to have everything to myself again. Some years later, when I was in high school, we heard that this girl, my former stepsister, killed herself. Something about bullying. I guess she encountered people who treated her worse than I did. Or maybe they treated her the same as I did, and it just built up. I didn't expend any energy worrying about it at the time. But I dream about it most nights.

The last time I stole an umbrella, before the ghost car came, I took it to a nice semi-secluded spot I'd found the week before. I was hoping that if I left an umbrella there, it'd stay put a couple of days. It did.

But when I showed up the next morning, there was an old homeless woman and a mangy-looking cat sleeping under it.

"That's my umbrella, hobo."

"I watched you steal it," the woman said, her eyes still closed. The cat looked at me, yawned, and stretched its paws out before standing up, walking in a circle, and lying back down against the woman's back.

"I'll be gone in half an hour. Let me stay here at night, and I won't take this back to where you got it."

"You wouldn't. They'd think *you* took it. Look at you."

"Just leave me alone."

I didn't know what else to say to the bitch, so I turned around and walked down the beach looking for a new umbrella. But it was a Monday and school wasn't out for summer just yet, so it was pretty bare. Only a couple of other slackers like me were there. One girl who was sunbathing looked too much like a grown-up version of my stepsister, and my stomach turned. If I walked along the beach too long, I usually saw her face somewhere, unbidden. I tried to avoid long walks on the beach because of it, but sometimes the search for an umbrella led me too far. Out of options that day, I headed back to my spot.

When I got there, the woman was gone like she'd promised. I used my book to sweep away the top layer of sand. She'd looked dirty, and I also wanted to make sure the cat didn't piss anywhere I might lie down.

Our arrangement lasted a good couple of weeks until I showed up one morning to find her dead under my umbrella, the cat sniffing her suspiciously. Like it was trying to decide how long it needed to wait, out of respect, before it started eating her face. Unwilling to deal with

what I'd found, I returned to a populated beach to scope out an alternative. Someone else could find her and report it.

Towels and huge umbrellas littered the sand, that day, occupied by other people sleeping and reading. I walked a few miles down the beach, unable to get the image of the dead woman out of my head. I imagined her rotting there, not discovered for weeks, abandoned by the cat. All umbrellas were in use, and I was about to give up and head home when I noticed a blue hatchback slowly making its way to the water.

At first, I couldn't see anyone in the car, but when it got closer, I saw my stepsister in the back seat. Next to her was the old woman. The cat lay across her shoulders and was licking her ear. As they passed me, my stepsister and the old woman both looked at me, flipped me off, then turned their faces toward the ocean.

It seemed like only I saw the car. No one looked up from their books or awoke from their naps. No one else acknowledged what was happening. The sun sat high in the sky and was white with heat, the clear sky the same vibrant blue as the car. A few people swam nearby. Children were building sand castles with green and pink and orange plastic molds. Laughing. Unconcerned.

First, the car floated for a moment as it drifted from the shore, rode the waves. I felt like maybe I should run to it, to save them or something. But I wasn't the hero type, and there had been no hesitation from either of them—and no rush either. Besides, they were both dead, weren't they? The car had crawled steadily into the water. Like it earnestly wanted this and had for some time. The moment felt savored. So I kept watching.

Then the car began to sink. The nose dipped under first, and it sank as slowly as it had driven. No flailing limbs, no struggle for the last remaining air. Just a car peacefully sinking.

Last to go was the back windshield. There was a sticker on it that I couldn't quite make out; it was too faded and a little flaky around the edges.

When it was fully submerged, my trance broke. I *should* have tried to help, should have at least called someone, should have screamed. Anything. For the first time, my silence frightened me. I fled the beach.

How to Forget

Start with breaking. Start with glass. With shaking. With your voice in a pit in your stomach. Start there. Everything falling away.

See only her. Watch her vibrate with rage. Hear her scream: Get out, Get out, Get out.

Say you're sorry, that you didn't mean to hurt her. Wince when she says she doesn't care and asks who the fuck cares if you didn't *mean* to hurt her because you *did* hurt her.

But still, say you're sorry. Again.

Know that something has died, something you can never get back. Feel the fear of losing her come alive, real in the dead space. Know this is an end, an end to something you never wanted to finish.

Drive. In a haze, grab what seems essential, and then drive.

Play no music. Listen only to your breathing and the sound of the shifting gears. Let the acceleration pin you to your seat; feel the harness tight against your chest. Let the tears flow, for the first time since youth; feel them sting your cheeks.

Go late, when highway traffic has thinned. No danger driving this fast.

Pass what cars are out; watch them fall back faster and faster. Go where they can't go.

Meld foot to gas pedal. Feel only go. Never stop. As if going could erase everything.

Blurring signs, trees, lights. Let your mind blank.

Don't remember her yelling, her whole body shaking. Don't remember the pain so evident on her face, tears and makeup streaming down her cheeks, her skin burning red with fury and terror and grief. Don't remember the thing that started it—the other woman.

Forget the other fights, those that repeated themselves month to month, year to year. Forget falling asleep while she cried next to you in bed. Forget being less than she needed you to be. Forget her crazy rules and expectations. And how she'd get pissed if you said the wrong thing. And how sometimes she'd cry just to get your attention. Forget not recognizing her in the middle of a fight and knowing that she was doing the same.

Don't remember how she squeezed the toothpaste wrong—from the front instead of the back. Or how she left the lights on when leaving a room, even after you asked her not to, so many times. Or how needy she was, how much attention she demanded, how she never used to cry until she wanted more than you could give her, how lately she'd cried almost daily, usually to get a reaction.

Forget all the other little things she did. Like getting peanut butter M&Ms, your favorite, at the store. And how she always told you she loved you before falling asleep, even after a fight, even when you refused to say it back. And how she was always proud of you, even for little stuff, even when your parents weren't proud of you, even when you weren't proud of yourself.

Don't remember her physical pain, or taking care of her when it grew too intense, when she couldn't get out of bed. Or loving her when she felt like a failure. Or just loving her. Don't remember the nervous excitement of meeting her, of the first time. Or the way she looked. Or the way she looked at you. Don't remember knowing it meant something, that it was a beginning.

Feel anxious. Feel guilty. Don't remember why.

Notice you feel lighter. Wonder why you're driving so fast. Keep going.

But then forget her name and everything that happened since meeting her. Forget birthdays and movies and promotions. Forget relatives passing and others getting married. Let it all fade.

Don't remember why you're here—racing nothing, racing yourself, racing time. Don't remember anything. Wonder if you've been drinking. Decide to go home. Try to remember where home is.

End with blankness, a void. Park. Your car is the only one in the driveway. Enter the house and see only our things. Know that it is as it always has been, but feel that something is off.

Think: Someone else is supposed to be here.

Think: Something is missing.

Tell yourself there are no places that feel empty, that there are no ghosts.

Fracture[9]

We skipped the usual steps. We met and fell in love and started playing house all in one day. We believed something together, and when we believed it, it was true. Nothing else more true.

When we met, this big, empty glass fishbowl sat on the table in the coffee shop where he was working. The only table with an extra seat, which he happily let me take. As we talked, our words floated around in the air, circling our heads and rushing past our ears, and some of them fell into the bowl. The words that meant wanting. That meant promising. That meant owning. All of these words went in and stayed there. And the more words that filled the bowl, the closer we felt, the more those words meant, the more real it all seemed. We felt so much meaning that day. And we liked the feeling, so we kept speaking words into the bowl.

He wanted me, only me. Wanted to be mine. Wanted me to be his. He promised safe. Promised stable. Promised us. Or at least that's what I heard. Either way, I believed him, and *he* believed him. That's the thing. He believed everything he said. I know because I asked, are you sure? I said, you have to be sure. He promised he was. Those words flew into the bowl, too.

I guess we were naive. Thinking these promises true. That we could make them true. That they could stay true. Thinking this bowl of words the key. We believed though we knew better. Believed that good, real things come easily. Believed we had it all. That we'd found *that thing*. We believed in fitting and rightness, that we had it. Believed nothing dangerous about jumping into the deep end blind folded.

---

[9] This entire chapter is reproduced from *Hobart: Another Literary Journal* (2014). Web. 30 Sept. 2014. <http://www.hobartpulp.com/web_features/fracture>.

It was like we'd known each other for years. Like we'd always been together. Even though I didn't know his mother's name or if he had a sister or if he smoked or if he was one of those weirdoes who didn't like chocolate.

We took the bowl of words with us, placed it on his coffee table, and continued to fill it. He said to be comfortable, to make myself at home. I settled in. I bought a second toothbrush. I took a drawer. I took two drawers. I rearranged his furniture.

It felt normal. Like why didn't everyone do this? Like why do it any other way? We agreed that it felt perfect. That it felt like fate. Like we were meant.

Until one day he stopped believing, for whatever reason. That morning he'd looked happy, had kissed my cheek and looked deep into my eyes and spoken more feeling words for the bowl. That evening he didn't want me anymore. He said we shouldn't have started in the first place. Said it like it was all my fault. Like I'd forced happiness on him. Like I'd trapped him in our dream, the dream he helped make real. Like he'd never believed. Never promised. Never wanted. Like none of the words in the bowl came from his mouth.

There was an audible cracking and crashing, an exploding, and pieces of the glass bowl that held our beliefs grazed both of our faces, leaving small traces, visible evidence, of the break, the violent jerk of our sudden entrance back to reality. A shard stuck in his thigh, just inches from that part of him that I liked to think of as mine, that part of him I would take into myself and hold there, that part of him that connected us. Another shard stuck in the crook of my arm, one of his favorite places to kiss. Others in both of our legs and hands. Our clothes had tiny tears where glass had broken through. Small pieces stuck all over us.

He pulled out the piece of glass lodged in the crook of my arm, and we saw it wasn't glass but one of the words, an owning word that used to be beautiful but now was ugly and sharp and fractured. I carefully removed the one from his thigh: a promise unfulfilled. We took the words out of each other, slowly and gently. Not saying a word, afraid of what would happen if we let more words escape our mouths. When only one word remained in him, I stopped. Like if I removed that word, it was really over. Like if I left it there, I could keep him. Like I could make this real thing not real. Like I could make the truth a lie and the lie true. But he reached down and took out that last word. The broken words lay in a pile on the floor. He swept them up and threw them away.

We looked at our wounds and looked at each other, both so clearly broken. We pictured the cuts as scars and knew they wouldn't fade. All because he'd stopped believing. I begged him to believe again, begged him to take the words from the trash and piece them back together.

He said, impossible. He said, those words were lies. He said, once belief is lost, you can't go back. He said, you can't discover truth and know it and disregard it.

All I know is that I want those things that were true to be true again. I mean I don't care that they were lies. I mean I want him to lie to me again, and to mean it.

Stealing Dreams

"Art is theft." – Picasso[10]

I have these dreams. Full stories. Not discombobulated scenes that bleed into one another, not allegorical replays of my day. No. These dreams have compelling, well-rounded characters who follow sophisticated structural plot lines. Like books. Not random images looping through my subconscious.

But these aren't books I've read—aren't even things that exist, as far as I can tell. I used to look for them.

I never have the same dream twice, never see the same characters, never journey to the same places.

One night I dreamed a medieval romance, a tale of courtly love. In verse. Even though I hate poetry. Even though I never read it. The colors in the dream were faded, as if the scenes came off an old manuscript with yellowed, cracked pages badly in need of a restorative touch.

I'm not always the main person in the dream. Sometimes I sit detached, know things without being told. These points of view seem like choices. Like there's intention. Like there's a point.

There was a dream in which a young orphan went on a quest to find herself and discovered her magical heritage—and her familiar, a silver fox. In another, a woman who'd been abused and abandoned her whole life became a tree. And one in which sharks all over the globe began disappearing, inexplicably, while a man tried to connect with and understand his pregnant

---

[10] As quoted in Shields, David. *Reality Hunger: A manifesto*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010. 1. Print.

wife. One in which a man, having hurt the woman he loves, is able to erase his memories by driving unusually fast. One in which a little girl who seems to battle mental illness discovers the monsters in her head are real.

And then there was this writer I fell in love with. He wasn't very good—as a writer I mean—had never really done anything. I mean he wasn't a *real* writer. More of a failed writer. His words. He had manuscripts in boxes in his attic. Novels, dreams, he'd abandoned. When I met him, he managed blogs for corporations. Said he felt like a sell-out, a whore, that his work was degrading. But he was your typical tall, dark, and handsome, and I wasn't interested in his work anyway. Not when staring into those eyes and thinking about where I wanted him to put his mouth.

Okay maybe he wasn't typical, maybe his eyes weren't the clear blue they are in my memory, maybe his jawline was less than sharp. Maybe I'm just lying to make myself look better. The point is: that's not the point. The point is maybe I was just lonely.

After our first date, I went back to his place. I wanted to fuck. I'd had a dry spell, okay. But he wanted to talk. And then he was too tired for anything. But I slept over anyway because he was cute. Because why not. Because I didn't want to sleep alone for once. That night, I dreamed about a woman who stole beach umbrellas because she was bored and high on her own privilege.

Apparently I woke with a confused smile on my face. He saw this smile. Said it drove him wild. Said it was irresistible, that right then he knew he had to have me.

Moments after waking, we were moving faster and covering more space than I ever had before. Seasoned acrobats, effortlessly making complicated maneuvers that I previously thought

possible only in porn. One moment, we tumbled around the bed. The next, he was carrying me into the kitchen without pausing. Then I was upside down, balancing with very little effort, defying what I thought I knew about physics and anatomy.

He was inside my head, matching the rhythm there, and I couldn't stop looking into his eyes. I felt filled up and couldn't help feeling this was something new. Every shift from one of us was matched by the other, and the awkwardness of a first time was noticeably absent.

For a moment, I thought I loved him but quickly dismissed the thought, reminding myself not to think such things.

For the first time, my climax didn't stop after a mere moment, rather waves, each crashing over the one before. I thought I might die. Everything was an intense white light, and I rode the waves to shore. When my vision cleared, I had collapsed on top of him, and he had a faraway look in his eyes.

He kissed me, apologized, and rolled me off of him. He pulled on a pair of briefs, dug an old typewriter from his closet, took it to his desk, and furiously began typing.

I glared. How had he gotten up after *that*? I wanted to make an exit. Wanted to huff and storm out. But my breath was only just steadying. My legs still seemed a bit shaky. Like I might fall if I got up. Like oh god it all still felt so good.

Eventually, when I was normal again I mean, I told him I was hungry, and he said to help myself to anything in his kitchen.

Did he want me to get him anything?

No, he had to get this down before he lost it.

I wandered into the kitchen and made an impressive mess fixing myself a bowl of cereal. Then I ate it on the couch, naked, watching a soap opera on TV. Finally, he came out of his room

rubbing his eyes. He apologized, again, and said he just had to write, said a story came to him—haha, he added—right as he came, and he was afraid of losing it. He'd gotten down enough to go back to it later.

I thought, Oh great, a writer who thinks he's punny.

We spent the rest of the day lazily alternating between tumbles—on the couch, the bed, the floor, the kitchen counter, the shower—and refueling in front of the TV. We made love anxiously, trying to recreate what had happened that morning. It was good and satisfying in a way, but we remained insatiable until I finally pried myself away to return home late that evening. The need for him, the fullness in the act, hadn't returned. And I had things to do.

The next time I saw him, we made love with the same eagerness as before—again without the result we wanted. But we fell asleep in each other's arms. I guess it was romantic, comfortable. I guess I was into it. Even though the only reason I was there was for another intense fuck. Even though what I really wanted was to think, I love you, again. What I mean is I really wanted to love him. So I guess I was trying it out.

My dream that night showed me a dog that, over the years, over decades, through various incarnations, watched over this small, rural town until the people in the town stopped believing in him and in each other, until the magic of his existence faded to normalcy, until the compassion he'd inspired faded into history. When their belief died, the dog died a final time and did not return.

The next morning, we were still hopeful, seemed to want the same thing. I mean he seemed as desperate as I was. We made love again immediately after waking, and this time was the same as the first. We merged, and everything around us dropped away, and the tall, powerful

waves crashed into me faster than I could recover between. After, he jumped up and ran to his desk as soon as we had finished. Again, it was annoying. But again, I lay still. Because it felt so damn good.

This continued. Every time we made love upon waking, it was the same overwhelming experience followed by him typing away for a couple of hours immediately after. Every time I felt lighter after. Like a weight was lifted. Like he'd fucked something out of me. But also like something was missing.

We'd been dating a month when, on one of our dates, he presented me with a manuscript, said he'd finished what he'd started after our first date, asked if I would read it and let him know what I thought. It was exactly what I'd dreamed that first night. Exactly. But I didn't tell him. He was so proud of *his* work. And I didn't want to take that away from him. He joked that I must be his muse and said he wanted us to be together. Like really together. Serious. Like he wanted me all to himself.

I continued to give him my dreams. And those dreams gave him all of his.

Before long, he had a pile of manuscripts in his office. All familiar to me. They weren't all picked up, but by the time we'd been dating a year, he'd already sold a couple.

The first time, I was happy for him. I told him his luck had finally turned. Said I was proud of him. He told me again I was his muse. I insisted that was silly, that he'd always had it in him.

I was afraid of what he'd think if he knew his stories were from my dreams. If he knew the muse thing was real. I worried he'd quit. Hate me. Leave me. So I just said I was proud of him, of his well deserved and long-awaited success.

But with time, I wasn't proud. He was achieving his dreams, but it didn't really feel well deserved like I said. At first, I hadn't minded giving him my dreams because I needed the attention, the affection it drew, needed the closeness. It was worth it to be connected. Until it wasn't anymore. After a while, it stopped feeling fair. Like what was I getting out of it? His love, his devotion. Was that it?

I started to wonder if that love, that devotion, was even real. And if it was enough and if he would still love me without my dreams. I wanted to stop the dreams to see but didn't know how to. I'd always had them. And dreams are the subconscious. Not controllable.

I took up running so I'd have an excuse to get up earlier than him. By the time he woke each morning, I was gone. I'd run out the dreams from the night before, so even when we made love upon my return and his waking, the dreams were gone, didn't go to him. At least I never felt them leave me. And he stopped rushing off to his typewriter after sex.

It was fine at first, but after a month, he grew cranky and distant. Made excuses not to spend time with me. I said, But I'm your muse, baby. When I said those things, he gave me a look. He said, Some muse. He said, I'll see you later. And I knew.

That night, I dreamed our story, but the people didn't look like us. All of our promises to each other were words floating in a bowl. The bowl broke, exploded. I dreamed our promises destroyed us. And that was it.

I didn't get up to run the next morning. When he woke, he tried to get up without me. He'd lost interest in closeness, in me. But I pleaded. I took off my clothes. Touched myself. Took his hand and let him feel my desire, how I needed him. He relented.

The moment I took him inside me, we connected like we had before. We were so full of need and fury and sadness and distance, and all of it faded as we fell into each other. We didn't stop until all of it was gone, until we both lay breathless and numb. I tried to hold him there with me for a moment, but he rushed to his typewriter like so many times before. I watched him and loved him for just a little longer. And then I packed my things.