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A PAINTED VOID

by

Kevin Larsen

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

Approved:

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2015

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ABSTRACT

A Painted Void

by

Kevin Larsen, Master of Arts

Utah State University, 2015

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Department: English

A collection of four original short stories written by Utah State University student Kevin Larsen. These fictional stories were written with particular attention to the magical realism and horror genres in an attempt to combine both the fantastic and the horrific. In addition to these stories, this thesis contains a literature review of both contemporary and historic authors including, but not limited to, Brian Evenson, Bret Easton Ellis, David Lawrence Morse, and Kelly Link.

(59 pages)

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

A Painted Void

Kevin Larsen

This creative thesis contains four original short stories and a literature review written by Utah State University student Kevin Larsen. The four short stories were written and revised in 2013 under the mentorship and guidance of Professor Jennifer Sinor. Works for the literature review were selected by Kevin Larsen after reading extensively within the horror and magical realism genres.

Horror and magical realism both are well established genres with their own rules and tendencies. By pulling from both genres, these stories explore ideas and themes of horror fiction using the structure and setting that magical realism allows. This isn't to say that these stories are simply horror themed magical realism. Instead, they are a kind of merger between the two genres, pulling what is needed from each without relying on the tropes and gimmicks that are often present in works of horror or magical realism.

The literature review portion of this thesis reviews stories from both contemporary and historic horror magical realism authors. The review specifically focuses on more contemporary works of fiction in an effort to place Kevin Larsen's own stories within relevant discourse.

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INTRODUCTION

Some time ago, I bought a thin booklet of Gustave Dore's illustrations for Dante's *Divine Comedy* in a used book store. The black and white engravings, reproduced on glossy paper, were captioned only by their brief titles: *Dante before the lion in the dark wood*; *Virgil throws a sop to Cerberus*; *Minotaur*; *Bertran de Born displaying his head*, etc. Amid representations of beasts, demons, many Virgils, and many Dantes, one engraving stood out to me, *Dante and Virgil approaching the entrance to Hell*.

Two figures, Dante and the ghost of Virgil, stand together, one with an upraised arm either pointing or dictating. I want to think they are speaking to one another, each telling their inner thoughts, but they are too far away to register those kinds of details. They stand in front of a cave, the black entrance partly obscured by a rocky outcropping in the foreground. The horizon, capped by dark clouds and cupped by a jagged line of shadowed cliff, glows either with dawn or with dusk. I prefer the latter. There are no trees in the background, no indication of spring or winter, nothing really, aside from two figures on the threshold of darkness while the light fades around them.

Why was I so taken by this particular image? There are many pages more striking than *Dante and Virgil approaching the entrance to Hell* within the bindings of my little book. Pages full of twisted bodies, torture and despair written on their faces. I focused on this particular engraving, I think, in part because it represents how I approach writing fiction, which is how I approach writing in general: knowing that I'm headed down into someplace dark.

When talking about his own work, Brian Evenson, a writer of dark and violent

fictions lined with black humor and stark prose, speaks of a sinister undercurrent that lurks beneath normal, everyday human interaction. “There is a sort of murmur to the world,” he says, “that consists of the speech of the mad, the tortured, the irrational, the dead and dying, the subversive, the savage.” Some of his stories aim to amplify this murmur to show its significance when it would otherwise be ignored. Other stories of his avoid the things whispered under our breath, as if afraid to examine them straight on for fear of seeing the incomprehensible. We look away but try to keep them in the corner of our eyes.

I admire Evenson's work, his ability to bring characters, and therefore myself as a reader, to a place where I am on the verge of seeing or hearing something that is just out of reach but which I never can quite get to. It's a strange place to be at the end of a story, both uncomfortable and curious to know more. This disoriented space, where what should feel ordinary feels odd instead, is a location I think Evenson is actively seeking for his readers. His stories continue to work within you after they are done, as if you have to stumble your way out of unease and back into comfort.

Evenson's goal, I think, is to point out the chaos and horror in our lives—at the very least to evoke those feelings. He consistently and effectively walks us to an uncomfortable edge where what we think we know is challenged by what he puts in front of us. Standing at the entrance, we think we know what is in the cave: loose rock, stale air, stalagmites and stalactites, pillars, walls, the build up of minerals, crystals of calcium carbonate, labyrinthine passages, dead ends, caved in roofs, cracks, fissures, and the drip drip drip of distant water sounding in the dark. Evenson whispers of what we don't know. He throws a match into the darkness and points at shapes that flicker in and out of focus.

We glimpse things that shouldn't be there until the match burns out. Story is over. All that is left are feelings. Unease. Fear. Horror. An after image. The shape of something hunched and twisted. The thought of smoke curling in the dark.

I'm interested in writing stories that start with those feelings, with the smell of smoke lingering around the nostrils, with the suggestion that the world is both chaotic and horrific. We, as individuals and as a society, tend to deny this suggestion because it is unpleasant. We want to think ourselves sophisticated, ordered, honorable, morally upright, so we keep things, truths about how depraved and horrible we are or can be, hidden in the dark, put away and forgotten. This is where truth festers. In the dark. We fear the truth that the world is chaotic and horrible because we inhabit it. Like Evenson, I'm interested in defining our fears, our imaginations, our worst selves, in giving shape to our base nature, but I want to move past the flickers in the dark. I want to fully light the recesses of the cave and not turn away. To do so, I will rely on elements from magical realism and horror

Magical realism offers a chance to extend our notions of perspective and reality beyond what we would normally call objective. The genre allows for the manifestation of the abstract. Concepts, ideas, imagination, fears, all can be housed in something concrete and described in physical terms. The magical realist provides a reality in which these things seem natural, but not in an "anything goes" manner. By definition, magical realism explores the fantastic while remaining tethered to the "real" workings of this universe. The goal is not to escape into other worlds, but rather to raise doubt about reality, then to recreate or re-imagine what we consider to be or experience as real. This is done primarily by normalizing those same fantastic elements which broke our sense of reality

to begin with. In an attempt to define such a tricky genre, Wendy Faris writes “Magical Realism combines realism and the fantastic in such a way that magical elements grow organically out of the reality portrayed.” Within the prose, the magical is presented in a casual way that does not highlight or emphasize its unreal nature. For example, in the story “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings,” by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, a supposed angel—an old man with enormous wings—falls from the sky and lands in a village. The wings, the existence of angels, are presented as matter-of-fact. Not an everyday occurrence but certainly not astonishing or unbelievable to the inhabitants of the village.

Matthew Stretcher defines magical realism as “what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe.” I’m drawn to the word “invaded” as it suggests that the combination of the fantastic and the real is something negative. I often find there is a corrosive undertone to magical realist texts as they deconstruct and rebuild the world around us. There is a sense of corruption or loss, as is the case in *Martin Dressler*, by Steven Millhauser, a novel about a man who quickly rises to the top as an architect, envisioning bolder and bolder creations which haunt the line between fantasy and reality. As each building becomes more grand and fantastical, a realization of one of Martin's wild dreams, they also become more and more empty of life, until it is Martin left alone in a vast building, beautiful, wonderful, magical, but starkly empty. These sentiments of loss and corruption come from derealization and defamiliarization, similar concepts but with slight differences. Derealization is the alteration of perception, which changes the expectations of normalcy for the reader: i.e. none of the villagers question a man with wings, so neither should we.

Defamiliarization is a technique used to describe common things in unfamiliar or strange

ways. For example, “Khostomer: The Story of a Horse” by Leo Tolstoy is told from the perspective of a horse. None of the story is unbelievable, but we hardly expect to see the world as a horse does. In magical realism, the two concepts influence each other in a compounding nature: defamiliarization leads to derealization leads to defamiliarization leads to derealization, etc. Reality is constantly being reconstructed and redefined as the story progresses, which allows stories to move further and further into the unfamiliar and unbelievable without distancing the reader.

The potential for failure in magical realism is in its very nature. When things become too unfamiliar, too alien, readers become detached. They stop reading. The fiction fails to engage or to illuminate, or to entertain. It is the author's responsibility to guide the reader into the strange and the unsettling without pushing them away—a difficult task at best—so the reasoning for writing in such a genre must be sound. I look at magical realism first as an exercise in perspective. Fiction helps us understand our world, and magical realism provides another facet of that understanding, another lens with which to examine ourselves and our surroundings. More than that though, magical realism allows the expression of our inner landscapes in more interesting and powerful ways by giving shape to what is there. We can define thoughts and emotions in visceral, visual terms, not just describe what triggers them, in an attempt to understand them more fully.

Horror fiction operates in similar ways. Often, horror stories contain monsters or phenomena that do not exist in reality. But, while both magical realism and horror allow for magical elements, the element within magical realism must be kept ordinary and made everyday. Horror has no such constraint. The non-realistic elements are immediate,

urgent, and intense, never ordinary. The strange is a spectacle, described with prose that startles, demands attention, and refuses to let go.

What is so ironic about horror fiction is that these terrible spectacles are actually shedding light on real issues or concerns that may be too abstract to explain. Stephen King writes that “we make up horrors to deal with the real ones,” a sentiment that I've come to agree with more and more as I read and write. Over the years I have slowly given a body to unknown fears. It's something twisted, horned, and pustule ridden, with a mouth too full of teeth, and a tongue too swollen to retract. As I understand more about myself and about what I fear, this thing will change. It will sprout a new head, or a new tail, or it will sprout feathers, or scales, or spines, or it will spawn smaller versions of itself that will warp themselves in their own terrible ways. But as grotesque and horrible as I can make it, I still prefer such a creature to the anxiety I experience when I don't corporealize my fears within fiction.

The common critique with horror fiction is that it relies too much on shock value. Just like magical realism, horror has the potential to create too much distance for the reader to cross. It's easy to put down a book that throws us into a sea of bodies and blood with little regard for how we arrived there. Horror elicits unpleasant emotions, and it has the tools, the subject matter, the language, to amplify those emotions to intolerable levels. The goal, then, is to captivate the reader, to ease them into a place where they want to turn away but feel compelled not to. Magical realism provides the framework for such a story. First, it allows for the manifestation of what it is we fear. It provides a place or a body onto which we can project our psychological landscape. Because magical realism requires that such things be told in a straightforward manner, it allows us to write about

the terrible and the horrific without losing the attention or interest of the reader. At that point, it is a matter of transition, of increasing the intensity of the prose to elicit the feelings that horror fiction provides. In that way, horror amplifies what magical realism offers. The end result is an attempt at reconciling ourselves and the horrors we create with the world we live in.

LITERATURE REVIEW

My work on this thesis has been influenced primarily by fiction texts, though some nonfiction texts have had an impact as well. My ideas about linked stories initially came from reading collections of stories that were somewhat related by setting, like Annie Proulx's *Close Range*, or by subject matter, like Brad Watson's *Last Days of the Dog-Men*. However, more beneficial and directly related to this thesis are collections of stories that are more linked, more unified, sometimes labeled a novel in stories: like Stuart Dybek's *Coast of Chicago*, Susan Minot's *Monkeys*, and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. The most influential of these has been Blake Butler's *Scorch Atlas* as it presents its stories both apocalyptic and bizarre as “a novel of 14 interlocking stories set in ruined American locales.”

Butler's book is perhaps the most visceral piece of fiction I have ever read. Uncompromising, it is a slog through a gorgeously grotesque version of America. But, as much as I enjoy his balance between such beautifully poetic language and mud-caked, apocalyptic landscapes, I look to Butler for form.

The stories in *Scorch Atlas* work together as fourteen different scenes, each exploring similar themes but through a different perspective. These perspectives all examine the fragility of the American family through what I can only describe as a series of unexpected plagues. Themes concerning inside and outside and permeation run through the stories. For example, in “Smoke House” a sheet of plastic hung in a ruined bedroom serves as a wall “to keep the outside out or the inside in.” Similarly, in “Want for Wish for Nowhere,” an instructional packet given to new mothers states that “there are holes in every home.” These instances of barriers and holes resonate throughout

nearly every story to explore what happens when we let the chaos of the world into our home and when we let the chaos of our home out into the world.

One of the brilliant thematic and structural moves in this book is the spacing out of the piece titled “The Many Forms of Rain ____ Sent Upon Us.” Originally this was written as one piece which appeared in *DIAGRAM*'s 2008 Innovative Fiction issue but has been separated into tightly constructed prose poems for *Scorch Atlas*. Butler has spaced each form of “rain” (“Water,” “Blood,” “Gravel,” “Teeth,” and “Ink” to name a few) between his longer stories. This creates a kind of rhythm that allows brief respites from the bludgeoning nature of the longer pieces. And these quick fictions work as interim stories that help thematically link stories together, ultimately making the collection more engaging as a whole.

From the horror genre, I've read haphazardly, anything from Edgar Allen Poe to H.P. Lovecraft to Stephen King. As I mentioned before, the genre is loosely defined, but I focused on reading works that were accomplishing things both horrific and literary: e.g. Brian Evenson's short story collections, *Altman's Tongue*, *Contagion*, *The Subtle Knife*, *Fugue State*; and classical works, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

The last ten years or so have seen a wave of writers who are invigorating the old horror cliches in interesting and sometimes mind-blowing ways. For example, *House of Leaves*, by Mark Z. Danielewski, is a massive, 709-page read that takes the age-old haunted house setup, rips it apart, and then pieces it back together as a kind of Frankenstein's monster of a novel. Danielewski essentially splices two narratives together. On one front, *House of Leaves* is a lengthy description of a documentary called

“The Navidson Report,” about a home whose interiors constantly change in dimensions, cry out in agony, and drive residents to homicide; on the book's other side, Johnny Truant, a sex-crazed, good-for-nothing tattoo artist, reads said description and frequently goes off on morbid and drug-infused tangents. The novel is eccentric and downright insane at parts. As the house alters its size, Danielewski mirrors those alterations by presenting the text upside-down, sideways, and at times, in one-word-per-page increments.

Bret Easton Ellis' *Lunar Park* might be one of the oddest examples of what horror can do. The book begins as a candid memoir about what I assume to be Ellis' real life battles with mainstream popularity and damaging narcotics. Slowly, though, the book shifts into an exercise in meta fiction once he (fictionally?) marries an actress, starts a family, and encounters evil spirits while working on his latest future best-seller, *Teenage Pussy*. I'm not sure exactly where or if there is a shift from nonfiction to fiction, nor do I care. The latter third of the novel is so ramped up as the main character/author chases himself down the rabbit hole. At the end of it, no one else in the story—not his wife, his children, the local police, his old friend Jay McInerney—has any faith in Bret the character (the author?). He is haunted by his father while at the same time haunting his own son.

Lunar Park is an excellent example of how intense horror fiction can get. The climax of the story is a train wreck of monsters and shifting realities. These nightmares coincide with crises within Brett's life: a runaway child, a separation from a spouse, a mental and physical breakdown from binging on alcohol and Valium. It's a smart move by Ellis the author, amplifying the prose along with the plot and character development.

Magical realism is the area I've read the least in, though I have read stories from

the Latin authors typically associated with the genre: Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino. I've read more extensively from contemporary authors: *Martin Dressler* and *The Knife Thrower* by Steven Millhauser; *The Shell Collector* and *Memory Wall* by Anthony Doerr; *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt* by Aimee Bender. My focus has been on setting, on observing how different authors incorporate fantastic elements into unsuspecting landscapes.

Some stories simply jump right into the fantastic. For example, "Conceived," by David Lawrence Morse, begins "Our village is built on a great fish—Ceta—so sizable we have room for nineteen huts, built with the bones we find floating on the sea." Immediately, we are posited into an unfamiliar space—on the back of a fish, no less—though Morse spends a significant amount of time describing the setting in a way that it is completely accepted, ordinary even, for the characters living on it. We even get a name for the giant sea creature, Ceta, who becomes a major character. As the story progresses, Ceta serves as a giant floating womb, in a semi-literal, semi-metaphorical sense. These details end up informing the overarching ideas or themes of the story: the mutual care exchanged between parent and child, and the mutual risks that such exchanges entail.

Other stories, like Kelly Link's "The Hortlak," reveal the fantastic gradually. We are introduced first to characters and parts of the setting, a convenience store named the All-Night. On the second page, zombies are mentioned, but only briefly and in such a way to suggest that nothing is out of the ordinary: "The zombies came in, and he was polite to them, and failed to understand what they wanted." More details are provided as the story unfolds and eventually we get a sense of these zombies and their role in the daily workings of the All-Night. At one point, a zombie coughs up a pair of black

pajamas and offers them to the cashier. At another, they pile the falling snow with their hands. None of it is ever fully explain, and all of it is told with such a mundane attitude. The zombies annoy the main characters, rather than disgust them, and they are curiosities for the reader rather than something to flinch at.

“Conceived” and “The Hortlak” demonstrate the range in approaches to magical realism. Both treat their fantastic elements as common, but Morse reveals those elements at the beginning while Link is more reserved with her details. I tend to write more like Morse and dump the reader into a fantastical place, then work to make the fantastic seem natural to the setting. However, an approach similar to Link's seems more appropriate when I bring horror into magical realism. Both genres fail when they distance their readers too much, and merging the two seems like a recipe to compound that distance. The stories I've written here are my attempts at a successful merger, one that brings both genres together to create raw and vivid narratives.

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