



LESLIE WHAT

## THE GENRE THAT DARES NOT SAY ITS NAME

We are creatures who seek to classify ourselves by tribe and history, creatures who must categorize every human experience to better understand it. You live either in a blue state or a red one... a team wins or loses the Pennant Race... a story is either realism or fantasy. We teach our children to navigate the dangers of the world by understanding cause and effect. If you tease a dog he'll bite. Wash your hands or you'll get sick. Run into the street without looking and you'll be run over.

But the child, being a child, notices the disconnect between cause and effect the first time she sees her sister cross the street without consequence, and is told she cannot follow. "Why?" she asks. "Why?"

A parent unthinkingly relies on the short answer learned from her parents: "Because." We cannot answer the question of why one child is spared while a speeding car mows down another. Any answer beyond "Because" could take a lifetime to explain. We are binary thinkers who are comforted by the certainty of black and white. We're taught that it is wrongfully lazy to dither; we find the uncertainty of the grey areas discomfiting. No wonder we struggle to name the genre Phantom Drift calls "*New Fabulism*".

You might know Literary Fabulism as Slipstream (a term coined by author Bruce Sterling), Magical Realism, Fabulist Fiction, Transrealism, New Weird, and Interstitial Fiction, or non-mimetic fiction (add your name here \_\_\_\_\_). It is rooted in folk tale, religious belief, magic, surrealism, and superstition. Fabulist writing blends literary tropes with fantastic conceits, and in the process frees fiction from the limitations of realism. Practitioners include Isabelle Allende, Karen Joy Fowler, Haruki Murakami, Murilo Rubiao, Kojo Laing, A.S. Byatt, Michael Chabon, Stephen Milhauser, Laura Esquivel, Ray Vukceвич, Judy Budnitz and all the writers included in our journal (add your name here \_\_\_\_\_). I'll go out on a free-floating limb and define fabulist fiction as fiction that explores the margins between what is known and what is unknowable.

The resulting dissonances can be shocking. Research suggests that we are wired to

seek connections in what would otherwise be observed as a world filled with chaos. When a neuron fires an electrical impulse, our brains translate that charge into recognizable language or familiar images. Perhaps this helps explain why we insist on naming objects and people in order to understand them, and in our attempt to comprehend a world of complexities that defy easy explanation, we assign imprecise language to describe the qualities of the Ineffable.

*Eheveh Asher Eheveh*—I am who I am” (Exodus 3:12), God tells Moses, an abstract communiqué from the Supreme Fabulist, whose presence straddles both the day-to-day world and the eternal one. How can three-dimensional beings like us come close to imagining the One Who is beyond dimension? “I am that I am” may be a clear and concise instruction to humanity on how we are to look upon God, but even the most devout amongst us might concede the instruction lacks the graphic impact of, say, visualizing a Jerry Garcia look-alike, with twenty-twenty vision, a wild beard, flowing robe, and extended pointer finger.

There’s a story in the Talmud that goes like this: “Rabbi Akiva warned the others that they would soon come upon magnificent columns of transparent blue marble, apparitions so glorious they would make the men weep with a need to understand and give a name to what they were seeing. ‘When you come upon the blue column,’ Akiva warned, ‘do not cry out that you have seen the waters of heaven falling toward earth. For the Psalmists say: He who speaks falsehood shall not be established before My eyes.’

“But when the sages came upon the vision at the entrance to Paradise, they forgot Akiva’s instructions, and to a man, each, except Akiva, stared intensely into the blue marble columns and gave it a name that he could relate to.

Each man, except Akiva, swore that he was staring at a heavenly river. Only Akiva knew that he was seeing a thing so magnificent, there were no words, no way to compare his vision to words, concepts, or any understanding of humanity.

*Eheveh Asher Eheveh*—I am that I am. The marble columns were not the waters of heaven, but the inscrutable face of the Ineffable. Rabbi Akiva alone did not succumb to the need to name what he could not comprehend. Moral of the story: He who dares to name the Divine can never truly understand it, for one cannot understand the Divine in human terms. As our cover artist John Frame says about his interstitial installation “The Tale of The Crippled Boy” (see <http://vimeo.com/31439049>), “When people ask what the work is about the real answer is that it isn’t about anything, and that’s not to say that it’s meaningless, rather that it carries its meaning in its own way, and on its own terms,

and I really think the only way to understand that meaning is by looking and letting go of thinking.”

In our first issue, Thomas Kennedy talked about the descriptive images Gabriel García Márquez used in “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings” (“*Un señor muy viejo con alas enormes*”). I read the story again, incorporating Kennedy’s wisdom about García Márquez use of concrete images to ground us into believing in magic, with John Frame’s thoughts about seeing and letting go.

*They looked at him so long and so closely that Pelayo and Elisenda very soon overcame their surprise and in the end found him familiar. Then they dared speak to him, and he answered in an incomprehensible dialect with a strong sailor’s voice. That was how they skipped over the inconvenience of the wings and quite intelligently concluded that he was a lonely castaway from some foreign ship wrecked by the storm. And yet, they called in a neighbor woman who knew everything about life and death to see him, and all she needed was one look to show them their mistake.*

Pelayo and Elisenda fail to grasp the stranger’s essential strangeness, illustrating their difficulty in confronting phenomenon that conflicts with their understanding of the world. They stare at the very old man, stifling their observations about his differences until he becomes familiar in their sight. We fear the unfamiliar, not the everyday, which might explain why we’re comfortable getting behind the wheel, but take valium before flight, even though we’re 43 times more likely to die in an automobile accident than on a plane (The World Health Organization estimates 1.2 million deaths from automobile accidents worldwide since 2004). A neighbor, who knows “everything about life and death,” provides the context for the stranger’s appearance, and Pelayo and Elisenda remain unafraid, suspecting this ancient mariner has come for their child, and that his accident has brought about the child’s recovery. Cause and effect, usually the simplest explanation.

In medicine they say, “When you hear hoof beats, don’t look for zebras.” I wonder if, at some level, Pelayo and Elisenda’s responses reflect their acceptance of this being’s essential nature—that he will neither harm nor help them, so they need not fear?

The mystery of “A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings” is not about *what* has happened, for the story makes clear the what, when, where, and who in the opening paragraph.

*On the third day of rain they had killed so many crabs inside the house that Pelayo had to cross his drenched courtyard and throw them into the sea, because the newborn child had a temperature all night and they thought it was due to the stench. The world had been sad since Tuesday. Sea and sky were a single ash-gray thing and the sands of the beach, which on March nights glimmered like powdered light, had become a stew of mud and rotten shellfish.*

The sensory detail is vivid and specific. The sick child, the stench, the three days of March rain. García Márquez never leaves his reader confused about what is happening in the story. It's the *why* that is in question, and this question refuses a simplistic answer. Instead, the story offers a complex examination of faith, belief, and the limits of compassion. The villagers seek to understand that this winged man by calling him a general; the parish priest cannot accept this creature as a being of God because the old man does not comprehend God in the same way as the Father Gonzaga. "...Even the most merciful threw stones at him, trying to get him to rise so they could see him standing."

What happens when we encounter that which resists our attempts to categorize it? Is he demon, or angel? Mysterious blue, or water column? Is it ever possible to understand what we cannot name? The villagers, unable to trust their perceptions, take comfort in being told what to believe. Thus, when a hairy woman comes to town as part of a carnival, and tells an outré tale of being turned into a spider, she is believed because she's given an explanation for her story, irrational as that explanation may sound. It helps that there's a moral lesson reinforcing the cultural, religious, and societal mistrust of disobedient women. Sneak out at night to dance and you'll turn into a spider. But how do you explain a winged man who isn't quite a man washing up into your courtyard? Some stories try to teach lessons to the reader, but some prefer revelation to explanation. The winged creature, who takes "no part in his own act," and lacking language, cannot deny or proclaim his presence, is reviled and mistrusted because the villagers cannot accept him as he is, without an explanation.

As a contemporary reader, how does the story's reluctance to reveal the nature of the very old man as angel or a demon affect our interpretation of the events? Might our interpretation change if we were of, or more familiar with the writer's culture? It's tempting to make everything fit neatly into place?

How much strangeness can fit into the work without losing the reader? Perhaps one

can look to Lewis Carroll for guidance.

‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;  
All mimsy were the borogoves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe.

We don’t understand what it means to be brillig; we cannot visualize a tove, but we understand that the toves are slithy and that the brillig *t’was*. While we may wish for more knowledge and certainty, the structure of the poem provides a basic understanding of the essence of both brillig and tove. For generations of readers, these revelations are enough to sustain engagement with the text.

Here’s the last paragraph of “A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings”:

*She kept watching him even when she was through cutting the onions and she kept on watching until it was no longer possible for her to see him, because then he was no longer an annoyance in her life but an imaginary dot on the horizon of the sea.*

The untidy real is, indeed, annoying. So is the imagined world, especially when viewed from a distance. The creative impulse, its wild and unpredictable nature, has no boundaries, and that vastness can be terrifying to a species in desperate need of order.

In the tradition of Wordcraft of Oregon’s Speculative Writers Series, *Phantom Drift: New Fabulism*, continues the ongoing exploration of the genre that isn’t, blurring the margins between what is known and what is unknowable, revealing the strangeness of the world, and allowing us to glimpse what might otherwise remain hidden, mysterious, unexplainable, terrifying.

*“The Jabberwock”  
by Lewis Carroll*

*‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;*

*All mimsy were the borogoves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe.*

*'Beware the Jabberwock, my son!  
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!  
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun  
The frumious Bandersnatch!'*

*He took his vorpal sword in hand:  
Long time the manxome foe he sought—  
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,  
And stood awhile in thought.*

*And as in uffish thought he stood,  
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,  
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,  
And burbled as it came!*

*One, two! One, two! And through and through  
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!  
He left it dead, and with its head  
He went galumphing back.*

*'And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?  
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!  
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!'  
He chortled in his joy.*

*'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;  
All mimsy were the borogoves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe.*