"SOMETHING DEEP AND RESONATING LURKED THERE" AN INTERVIEW WITH VANESSA BLAKESLEE

BY MELANIE J. CORDOVA

We are privileged to interview author Vanessa Blakeslee about her short story collection *Train Shots*, published by Burrow Press in 2014. The title story was first published in *Harpur Palate* 9.2, and below are Blakeslee's thoughts on writing this collection, her work as an author, and future projects.

MJC: You begin this collection with a very energetic story, "Clock-In." How did you decide on the narrative perspective for this story as opposed to, for example, "The Lung"? What narrative considerations do you make before you begin writing? How do you keep that energy moving?

VB: The question of energy and narrative considerations is crucial, one that is probably not discussed enough. In both of these cases, the restrictions placed on these stories at their impetus very much molded the conflicts. I often feel like whenever I'm writing an opening, the story's inevitable conclusion is already embedded in those lines, even if I can't clearly see what that is yet. What do I mean by restrictions? "Clock-In" and "The Lung" emerged from two very different writing exercises—"Clock-In" from a second-person exercise, where the narrator is instructing someone on a task, and discovering what kind of story emerges from there. "The Lung" is from the short story exercise in Douglas Glover's excellent craft book, *Attack of the Copula Spiders*, which I highly recommend (both the exercise and the essays). The latter exercise advises you to pick a point-of-view and

an odd situation between two people, push the conflict forward with scenes, and not go back in time. So, as you can tell, these exercises, albeit written years apart, resulted in two very different outcomes, in tone, pace, length, etc. In both, the choices of present tense and direct address bring a theatrical bent to the stories—a few readers have pointed out how they could work as monologues. And that contributes to the stories' brevity, because I can't imagine either of those conflicts playing out for longer than they do. Interesting, though, to note the commonalities these very different exercises generated—the earnest, confessional voice, the serious and unusual yet comic subject matter. How the narrative is forced deeper, to meditate on the present ongoing situations rather than get mired down in backstory. I couldn't imagine either story going longer; if anything, I can think of how to snip here and there and make each one even leaner.

When I sit down to approach a conflict situation that I'm curious about exploring, I often try out several different opening lines in different tenses, points-of-view, and genders. That way I figure out which one is the "hottest" in terms of energy—which "container" is sound enough to carry the conflict, and lively enough to relay interest and surprise. I focus on keeping the action moving forward; backstory, when necessary, I can always fill in later. Keeping a short story moving, for me, involves pushing the protagonist into another corner. That "corner" can be any number of encounters: a new area of the setting, a character or group of characters, a weird object, or some peculiar assemblage of all three. Then I just see what they do, how their actions make them feel. Sometimes, depending on how high-stakes the conflict situation is, you can use novelistic devices, weave in subplots and image patterns, and end up with a longer, deeper story. Not so with "Clock-In" and "The Lung," which are more the slice-of-life variety of conflict, and aren't so much concerned with the consequence of events playing out over time.

MJC: *Train Shots* has a connection to a wide variety of locations. Each story is grounded in place without disrupting the narrative. What sort of research do you do about these places to do this so successfully? How is it that in a piece like "The Sponge Diver" the location manifests itself so well in Melissa and Jono, for instance, even though it's not a huge part of the story itself?

VB: In this collection, I've spent time in most of the locations with the exception of the "Princess of Pop"—I've never been to L.A. unless you include the airport. New Orleans I've only visited briefly, as a weekend tourist, but gleaned enough to bring "Beignets" to life. As for Costa Rica, I lived there for a good part of 2008 and have never been to Nicaragua, but it didn't take very long for my imagination to start popping with images and anecdotes that ignited into fiction. And when you haven't been to a place, I'm a firm believer that the fiction writer is granted the passport, if you will, to invent. For instance, I've never been to Nicaragua, but since it neighbors Costa Rica, and there are many Nicaraguans in that country, often working manual labor jobs, I felt like I knew enough and could borrow enough sensory details of that part of Central America to invent. Our neighbors, American expats, had a horse farm in Nicaragua that's mentioned in "Welcome, Lost Dogs," and the scenario with the poor farmers chopping down the good trees was a true story the wife told. So there are numerous ways to authentically incorporate places you haven't been, by way of Internet research and/or conversations with those who have been there. The only contract you've got to maintain with the reader when writing about a place you haven't been, I think, is to invent with due diligence. If you can pull that off, you can have fun writing about anywhere.

This is what I ended up doing with my novel, *Juventud*, which will be released in September 2015 by Curbside Splendor. Most of that novel takes place in locations I haven't visited—I simply couldn't afford to spend a couple of weeks in Colombia on a research trip, never mind Israel, where the protagonist ends up in a later chapter. This meant a lot of time on the Internet, studying the popular tourist sites in Jerusalem, what different neighborhoods of that city looked like, and the bombings that were going on in the early 2000s. Later on I made friends with an Israeli fiction writer at Ledig House, and he was kind enough to read the chapter and give feedback. With the exception of a few very minor details, I'd done a solid job of rendering Israel on the page. So that's something you can always do, too—seek out someone, a friend of a friend if you don't know anyone directly, who does know that particular place you're writing about, and have them proof your draft.

As for a story like "The Sponge Diver" or "Ask Jesus," where the setting doesn't play such a large role in the conflict as compared to others—those stories could almost be set anywhere—I think it just depends on the nature of the conflict. Playing up the setting in those cases might have felt forced, I suspect. Going back to the subject of energy: you work with what arises organically from the initial elements, rather than impose upon the narrative. In "The Sponge Diver," it's enough that Melissa has a fascination with France, frequents French restaurants, and listens to Edith Piaf. We don't have to follow her to France. If a story's not setting-driven, no need to force it. Since I've lived for so long in Orlando, the setting's elements wove their way into the backdrop naturally and subtly, which creates an altogether different effect that I quite like—one that allows the characters' bizarre behaviors and interactions with strange objects to take center stage and really pop.

MJC: A recurring premise I saw was women in these stories suffering various forms of abuse—"Barbeque Rabbit" and "Uninvited Guests" come to mind regarding physical abuse, and "Hospice of the Au Pair" and "Don't Forget the Beignets" for women who seem more emotionally abused by the people around them. Why did you find it important to depict this reality in this collection and what spurs stories like this for you?

VB: Some readers have remarked on the physical violence in the collection, not necessarily in a negative way, but that such subject matter challenged them—especially the stories where animals meet a violent end. How we treat animals says a lot about how we treat one another, so I suppose that's a variation on exploring the human condition. I have no interest in gratuitous violence, but in literary storytelling, plots are propelled forward by characters doing something. Even backstory, in order to carry significant weight, has got to contain trouble; hence, Nancy is a recovering victim of recent abuse, which explains her delicate emotional state at the beginning of "Uninvited Guests." I suppose I have found that when characters are as emotionally troubled as they are in *Train Shots*, the most discernible way to show that emotion is through the physical. They are messy people, and

violence is messy. But in storytelling, the meaning and power lies in subtlety, so I've done my best to shade my characters' lashing out in unusual and unexpected ways. For instance, we don't know for sure what happens at the very end of "Barbecue Rabbit"—he rushes her with the knife, but in the next moment perhaps she jumps aside and wrestles it from him. Or perhaps firefighters break down the door. Who knows? What's important is his choice to attack, not so much whether he succeeds or is stopped. Hitchcock understood this so well—how so much imaginative power resides in what isn't shown, what happens off-screen.

But I digress. I guess the unfortunate, more obvious and less interesting answer is that abuse runs rampant and has no bounds, which makes for fertile ground to explore in literary fiction. Those who abuse, whether verbally, physically, or some insidious combination of the two, exist in every walk of life, social class, racial and ethnic group, political persuasion, gender, etc., etc., and we fool ourselves if we believe otherwise. What's more bothersome and harder to nail in fiction as well as real life is psychological abuse. I myself have been on the receiving end of such behavior at different times in my life and with different men, and the lengths to which they can verbally and emotionally manipulate is unreal, and the damage is often far deeper and more lasting than many people are aware. I think Elizabeth Strout does that so well in *Olive Kitteridge*, depicting a harsh, narcissistic wife and mother and the ramifications of her behavior for herself and those surrounding her later on. Narcissists and borderline personality disordered individuals are the types that have you doubting your sanity and not merely bending over backwards, but twisting yourself into a pretzel to appease them.

So, are the doctor in "Hospice" and Alan in "Beignets" narcissists? I'm not sure, but I suspect they might fall somewhere on the spectrum. My novel, *Juventud*, explores such difficult personalities in a greater light. But any foray into abusive subject matter is accidental on my part—simply my subconscious unearthing the skeletons it needs to explore.

MJC: The title story "Train Shots" brings us into the life of a railroad engineer, P. T., and becomes fascinating because of how his unique professional

concerns intersect with everyday problems, like ending a romantic relationship. Why did you decide "Train Shots" should be your flagship story for this collection? How do you see it as the connecting thread that holds the rest together?

VB: "Train Shots" was first published by *Harpur Palate* a few years ago, under the editorship of Barrett Bowlin, and is one of my most memorable and unusual stories. So we knew we'd include that one from the beginning. The tone and theme made it a ready contender for the final spot, and usually the placement of the title story bears weight, so that factored into our deliberation and eventually deciding on the book's title—*Train Shots*. But also there's a double-meaning to the phrase "train shots." In one sense, the collection is a journey, the reader peering in on different characters in various settings, glimpsing a "shot" of these individuals' lives before the train zooms on. Then in the title story itself, P.T. eats dinner at a dive bar alongside the tracks in Winter Park, where the bartenders offer "train shot" drink specials when the trains go by. One might surmise it's the same Tex-Mex joint where the reader "enters" the book via "Clock-In." But I'll leave that for readers to decide.

MJC: Limits on space and freedom to travel emerge as a larger concern for a majority of characters in this collection. In "Princess of Pop," for example, the Princess can hardly go to the store without being surrounded by paparazzi, and in "Uninvited Guests" Nancy has restrictions placed on her living situation by her religious landlords. What struck me was that in your title story "Train Shots," P. T.'s very profession necessitates travel, but doing so has dangerous consequences. Can you talk a bit about this flip at the end of the collection? Did you feel compelled to question these spatial limits and boundaries, and even trap your characters within them? How do you see that played out in reality?

VB: That's an interesting observation, one that hasn't been mentioned before. I suppose that the confines of space have to do with the inherent limits of stories themselves—in a sense, you've got your characters "trapped"

in whatever setting and situation you've placed them. Then you trap them further by pushing them into corners, seeing what they'll do under stress: rise to the occasion or trip? The Princess of Pop's very conflict is that by permitting the commercialization of herself, she has lost the privacy that the rest of us can find in public space—the anonymity of walking down a city street. I'm intrigued by that aspect of celebrity, what it means to not be able to venture into a pharmacy for some shampoo without harassment. And yet she willingly participated in setting this trap for herself. How might she possibly escape? She realizes that even "reinvention," as she's daydreamed it, won't give her the absolution she craves; that's why she ultimately turns to death. But death isn't the answer. The story ends on the precipice of her survival, and should she live, we can surmise that she'll have to go deeper, find a greater spirituality and peace that can only come from within herself.

So entrapment is dangerous, but so is a "life in motion," as you point out, for P.T. the engineer. Danger lurks in one's own backyard as much as in the great unknown. What does that mean for us and how we go about our lives? I suppose that we must go on. We can't shirk or hide, nor must we blame or abuse ourselves for the mysterious injustice of the cosmos. Each person has got to come to terms with that truth, in his or her own way, and face the consequences in making mistakes. In *Train Shots*, we often see what happens when they don't. But there are moments of hope, too. You mention Nancy, the Reverend's tenant in "Uninvited Guests." The Reverend's controlling "rules," we learn, stem from several fears, perhaps exaggerated but not entirely unfounded. So Nancy's got to navigate them for now, but clearly she's not going to live in his carriage house forever. That story ends on the hope that she gains a stronger sense of self, focuses on creating a solid foundation for her and her daughter, and moves on to a better place.

So I wouldn't say I've done any of this consciously, other than deal with space in a very practical sense in fiction—asking myself, while drafting, what are the rooms or workspaces where I can push my characters, where they'll have to face their demons? How will they try to escape? Will they succeed, or fail? P.T. corners himself by unknowingly going out for a meal at the one restaurant in town that celebrates the train with shot specials—this

arises naturally out of the story, but is exactly what I mean by painting your characters into a corner. He's fled there to find solace, but solace in drinking and drunken bar talk is a false solace, an unhealthy avoidance tactic. But he gets a reprieve in his rescue by the cop, and learns something new—how someone else in a harrowing profession deals with emotional hardships on a regular basis.

MJC: Who are your literary influences and in what tradition do you see yourself working? What are you working on now that we can look forward to?

VB: For short stories, my go-to authors include Poe, Chekhov, Hemingway and Sherwood Anderson, O'Connor, Alice Munro, and Lorrie Moore, to name a few. My foreign writer friends claim that no one can match the North Americans for mastery of the short form, so I'm afraid I've stuck rather close to home in that realm. For novels, Tolstoy and Atwood. For craft, John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction* and Douglas Glover's *Attack of the Copula Spiders* I find myself returning to again and again. I harbor a geeky desire to complete all the exercises at the back of the Gardner book.

I've sort of worked my way into a regular book-reviewer spot at the *Kenyon Review*, which has led me to discover some terrific foreign titles. International writers often inspire me to approach language and form in new and surprising ways. Irish writer Kevin Barry's novel, *City of Bohane*, which won the IMPAC award, completely blew my mind in its mastery of lyricism, suspenseful storytelling, and fresh, compelling characters; also delightful and engaging was *Lovestar* by Iceland's Andri Snaer Magnason, for different reasons. Recently I read *The Ninth* by Hungarian novelist Ferenc Barnas, which reminded me how the European writers conceive and approach the long form in astoundingly different ways than we do.

Over the past several summers I've been slowly churning out a novel-in-stories tentatively titled *West End Girl*, and I've almost completed an entire first draft. Set in the West End of Monroe County in northeastern Pennsylvania circa 1980, the storyline centers on Jane Hinton as she enters high school in the wake of her father's sudden death, and continues into her

young adulthood. The project grew from one of my short stories, "Shadow Boxes," which was shortlisted for numerous prizes and winner of the inaugural Bosque Fiction Award. I had not paid the story much attention, but the acclaim it garnered as finalist at numerous contests eventually caused me to step back and take note. I wondered if there was more to mine in that subject matter, if I had been shying away from exploring the rural landscape of my roots when something deep and resonating lurked there, begging to be captured in fiction. Thus far, the chapters function as standalone yet closely linked stories, in which seemingly small moments contain great emotional power—and often the dark side of small-town American life. Upon completion, I envision the book to capture characters and themes akin to Richard Russo's fictional explorations of upstate New York and New England, and Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge*.

Aside from that project, my interest in the dark side has lured me to Poe and speculative fiction, rather than the gritty social realism, quirkiness and black humor that runs through *Train Shots*. I expect my next short stories and second novel will be quite different. Not fantastical in the vein of Karen Russell, *per se*, but more imaginative and strange in the tradition of the tale and speculative fiction. There's a lot of downright lousy and mediocre dystopic fiction flooding the market right now, not enough that meets the bar set by Atwood's MaddAddam trilogy or David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*. But when I sit down I intend to write something lasting and great.

We'd like to extend our thanks to Vanessa Blakeslee for taking time to share her work with us. We found her words on the writing process as insightful and compelling as her short story collection *Train Shots*. We are honored to have published the title story and can't wait to read her new work.