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DOI: 10.25148/etd.FIDC006586

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

THIS TERRIBLE SILENCE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Jeffrey Bonar

2018

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by Jeffrey Bonar, and entitled This Terrible Silence, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Julie Marie Wade

Nathaniel Cadle

John Dufresne, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 5, 2018

The thesis of Jeffrey Bonar is approved.

Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

Andrés G. Gil
Vice President for Research and Economic Development
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2018

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

THIS TERRIBLE SILENCE

by

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Florida International University, 2018

Miami, Florida

Professor John Dufresne, Major Professor

THIS TERRIBLE SILENCE is a collection of eighteen stand-alone stories. The work largely focuses on characters on the fringe of society—alcoholics, gamblers, thieves, liars, and loners, who feel trapped or destined to repeat their troubles. In the struggle to break free, either by self-fulfillment or outside interference, these stories showcase the characters' hearts and wills in the face of often daunting or insurmountable desperation.

The stories in this collection are influenced by the work of Raymond Carver, and the Dirty Realism of Larry Brown, Breece DJ Pancake, Jayne Anne Phillips, and others. In the title piece, the narrator intends to tell a man vs. nature story of his encounter with a cougar, but he quickly dissolves into a battle with his own slipping mental health in the face of a failing relationship. In the first-person point of view, the act of telling the story holds its own exigency for the narrator's need to understand his or her motives and desires. In theme and style, I've sought to put together a collection that might allow readers to find truth and empathy from common, low, often marginal, but largely human characters.

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The Recruiter's Wife

“I had a dream that I was having a baby, except it wasn't a baby—it was my hand. It was dying, and I was looking at my hand.” Lynn opened her palm, viewed it in absent thought, and closed it again. “Other people wanted to hold it, but I wouldn't let them. A crowd was gathering, and my hand was cold and blue in my lap. Then I woke up.”

Boone took in a deep breath through his nose as if he was about to respond, blew it out in a cloud of cigarette smoke.

“Anything to say about that?” She said.

They lay a body width apart in a cheap floral printed motel bed. The wallpaper, a sick fading yellow so that nothing illuminated in the single lamp looked quite right.

Boone paused for the effect of thought, though he had none. “I don't know. That's pretty wild. Fell asleep on it probably.”

Lynn shook her head slowly. “Can't tell you nothin'.”

“I'm not some fortune teller if that's what you're after.”

“Maybe I'll go see one then. Just thought it was interesting is all.”

Boone rolled away on his side, cigarette dangling in his fingers off the bed. “Isn't that what I told you?”

Lynn smacked her lips in a fed-up tick. “It's freezing in here.” She slid out of the covers and pulled open the window curtain, stood with her hands on her bare hips. A slate gray sky and trucks roaring down I-95. Denny's across the

street with two cars in the lot. An entirely ordinary and monotonous scene for her. Every highway motel and every morning the same in its own manufactured way. Another gas-stop town. Lemon-scented cleaner, slight musk under stiff sheets. They had driven ten hours north from Charlotte, up that long stretch of highway with nothing but the radio fading in and out of static and no scenery to watch aside from slowly changing road signs. "Are we getting up or no?"

"Give me a minute." Boone took a drag and blew the smoke up to the ceiling where it hung in a slow swirl. The long surgical scar running from his elbow down the fat of his forearm shined slick and pearly as snakeskin.

She stood in front of the bathroom mirror while he showered, new folds and wrinkles to take note of, an ivy stretch of a vein reaching underneath her eyebrow. The electric fly-trap hum of the heat lamp grew louder above until the timer hit its limit and clicked off. She twisted the knob on again. Boone hummed a slow brood of a melody she could not recognize, and she let the steam build across her reflection.

The water knob squeaked off, and he stood behind the curtain dripping. "Throw me a towel, would you, dear?"

They both ordered the basic breakfast at Denny's and drank coffee slowly without any rush and very little talk. Boone had his laptop open to catch up on the boys he'd be watching on the field that day. A junior pitching prospect with a heavy sinker, late action and weight that his teammates compared to trying to hit a bowling ball. A younger first baseman hitting well above league average.

Sixteen home runs last season, long arms and powerful legs driving an easy, fluid swing. He picked apart their stats. Watched video closely to find any weakness in mechanics, a stress point on the arm, dangerous imbalance or timing that their bodies cannot maintain as they age.

“Needs to raise that arm slot,” he mumbled over a spoonful of egg.

“What was that?”

“Nothing, nothing.”

The two of them alone at a window booth, Lynn watched trucks pull onto the entrance ramp and tried to imagine what each might be hauling. A young waitress leaned with her elbows on the register counter, flicking absently through pages on her cell phone. Everything in Lynne’s world performed just as expected, like background actors in her own slow, sad drama. She set her eyes on the back of Boone’s laptop.

“You ever have any dreams that just won’t leave you alone?”

He took a sip of his coffee but did not look up. “Talking about that one you had last night?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t think you’re pregnant, do you?”

“No. Of course not.”

He nodded and she could see his eyes scanning the screen.

“You have any dreams last night?” Lynn said.

“Can’t usually remember any.”

She left most of her potato hash spread out on the plate. He wedged a few bills under the coffee thermos and walked out.

Boone left to meet with coaches and players at the high school nearby while Lynn stayed behind at the motel. She wedged her feet under the bed covers, flipping through channels on the TV. Talk shows, infomercials—she stared at the images before they no longer registered any response. A vacuum droned back and forth in the room above. She pulled the sheets and wrapped them around herself, walked to the window with the white train dragging across the carpet.

A man stood smoking at the edge of the parking lot, one foot in the grass. He dialed a number on his phone and held it to his ear. Lynn watched his mouth move with some fascination for a time, the man standing very still and eyes down at his feet. But then he smiled and seemed to laugh, and she felt strange then to watch from her window, suddenly intrusive, and what if he might look up just at that moment to see her. She turned and sat back down on the bed, reached to shut off the TV, and lay down for a few minutes of light sleep.

The room was dark and well into the evening when she woke. Occasional headlights arced the ceiling and walls before they were snuffed out and the light would settle. Lynn stared at the ceiling and flexed her hand open and closed. She did not have her dream again; instead, quick flashes of afternoon images fleeting as smoke, yet it seemed to hover over her mind. The cool gray skin that was both her own and not her own, everyone's eyes looking on with concern.

Boone would not be turning in until late in the night. She knew his routine well—drinks with the coaches if they would allow it, and drinks all the same if they did not. He would never say anything about it, but Lynn knew the baseball diamond and these run-down towns brought up a longing in him. Memories of his glory days rush in all at once with the first muffled smack of the catcher's glove, smell of pine and leather and dirt. The game a steady rhythm of so much of his life, before the muscle in his arm tore away. He used to be a good man, she thought, but all men need to blow off that hurt one way or another, and there's not much good left in him.

Lynn slipped on jeans and a sweater from her suitcase and walked down the steps to the front parking lot. Just down the road, a neon beer sign was glowing, and she crossed the empty street in the patchy light of the motel and followed the shoulder. A small scattering of men drank alone with an understood distance to separate them like solitary animals. Bruce Springsteen playing softly on the jukebox. Lynn took a stool at the bar and ordered a lager that poured out flat as apple juice. She sipped at it absently. A silent Yankees game played out inning after inning. The men stared at the screen but showed no signs of interest.

She thought of Boone when they were younger, well-built and athletic in a modest, purposeful way. He had a thick mustache then, strong hands and a quick flashing smile. A pitcher for the White Sox farm system, it looked like the world was open for him and he knew it. Lynn quit her waitress job, followed Boone throughout the South Atlantic League, went to all of his games. Those years all seemed to blend together to her now. Such excitement being on the