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SEVEN STORIES

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
The University of Mississippi

by

JASON EDWIN MOLESKY

May 2016

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ABSTRACT

A collection of seven short stories.

DEDICATION

For Kate.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the members of my thesis committee, Tom Franklin, Chris Offutt, and Dan Stout, for encouraging and challenging me.

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“We got a whole pile right by the stove,” Maggie said.

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“Harold,” I said. “Maggie made you some soup. It’s chicken soup, Harold. Harold.”

He wrinkled his nose and gummed his lips a couple times and let me tell you it was disgusting and sad. He wiped the water from his sagging old face and said, “You stick that soup up your fuckin ass.” Then he cackles, coughs, the same old show it’s been since summer turned winter and Dr. London (no relation to the writer) tells him he’s got six months left to be alive on this Earth.

After the coughing quit, Harold started rooting in the endtable drawer next to his sofa: Bible, hankies, matches, lint. As if he was groping for something he'd held close in his dream.

"Harold, you haven't had any cigarettes in this house for three months, pal," I told him. I razed him again with the holy water sprinkler. The droplets stuck plumb to his cheek and run down his stubble, and if I had been Maggie for just a moment I could have let myself cry—not out of sadness exactly, but out of something it don't make no sense trying to put words around.

"Stop with the damn water," Harold said. "What am I, a dog? A misbehaving dog?" He glanced at Maggie's back in the kitchen, then his voice lowered to a whisper. "You'd do it for a dog, wouldn't you? You'd do it for a horse wasn't suffering half as bad as me. How many times do I have to beg you? Just look at me. I'm as good as dead already. Put me out of my misery, Georgie. Take the pillow tonight and do it."

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UNHOUSED

Ashley's breath came so heavy that the barn's aluminum roof seemed to heave. She took off her splattered safety glasses and wiped her brow with a rugged leather glove. It was strange to think that she had once shrunk from the sight of blood. Her lats and delts burned, but she smiled as she turned back to the work. She always savored the last steer of the day.

“So that *you*,” she grimaced, bringing the axe down, biting it into bone — “Can *have*,” leveraging her 120 lbs. to dislodge the blade from the beast's girdle — “Another goddamn *yacht!*” The beeves' meat gave little sound, as if she were driving the axe into good topsoil. Their femurs, though, clattered against the killfloor, recalling the cantering horses of her youth. She swung from the knees and hips, swung back the steel, held it up, poised like the guillotine she felt herself to be.

Each morning just after dawn she tromped down the stairs from her apartment above the Safari Cafe to see three Bengal tigers nuzzled together in sleep along the inside of the containment fence. They looked so innocent then, the rise and fall of their breathing. At night, from her bedroom window, she would see them sashaying under moonlight in their enclosure: dazed, perhaps drugged, like dream figures awaiting summons.

Most mornings she whistled cheerful songs through the pleasant reek of the carnivores' dung. Haze dissolved in the early light among poplar and cherry. Unseen parrots heralded her coming: sweet songs, imperial songs, belted out from breasts plumed the colors of raucous lovemaking. Rumor had it that the tropical birds had been donated to the Sweetwater Big Cat Sanctuary by an old, full-blooded Chickasaw man, name of Thockriquel. He was the head of the tribal council, and had leased thousands of acres to Halliburton shortly after the shale fracking started. Ashley didn't believe it. She had seen photos of the Ghost Dancers at museums, in homes, and in bars near the reservation. No Indian leader, she thought, would do such a thing.

She passed sleeping tigers and lions, a few leopards and jaguars, too. She was their god, their mother. Her axe gave the sheen to their gorgeous pelts.

Her steel toe boots felt light on her newly calloused feet. Early in the summer, though, just after she'd arrived in Oklahoma from Penn State, the boots had bitten hard and blistered her arches and heels. They'd seemed so heavy back then, when she still got winded after just a few plunges of the axe. Walking the park's gravel paths, she'd felt like a convict dragging his iron ball. Now the boots were as nothing. Her tendons sprang like

trapeze wire. At night, as the tigers were finishing their meals, she would prance and spin before their enclosures, whispering her love. The future didn't matter. The past had never been. As she lay in her hard twin bed above the jungle cats, she sometimes dreamed that she was sprouting fangs and claws.

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FINAL LETTERS FROM DETENTION

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My mother never remarried or even had a boyfriend. "You're the only man I need, Mitch," she'd say. She and I still live on the thirty acres her parents left her just outside Ocala, FL. Her family says it was once a horse farm, which I've heard is a euphemism that people use in polite company to describe former plantations. My mother never speaks of the familial past, nor of my father, and I don't ask her anymore about

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If he had died an official death, I would have found the documents by now. I would have visited his grave on a leaf-strewn day in late autumn and had a moment like people do in movies. I suppose he could have changed his surname (as my mother changed mine). Otherwise, I would have found him; I know my way around computer networks, and someone with half my abilities could easily find anyone they want to find. And so I’ve evolved darker, more interesting theories. Perhaps he was murdered by my mother’s family and buried in secret, so as to prevent a Jewish interloper from laying hands on the family estate. Either that or he slipped into an alternate reality through a tear in the spacetime continuum and cannot find a way to return to the present.

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DISASTER OPTIMISTS

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Rahmali looked at the chubby nailbitten fingers still resting lightly on his shoulder. A child's hand. Her chipped electricpink nail polish recalled the Flamingo casino in Las Vegas and an old saying of his father's: (*A married man must be a careful man.*)

"Okay, yes. Thank you. I will get it now," Rahmali said.

Apart from the wallmounted diplomas from Harvard College and the University of the West Indies Faculty of Medicine, the only adornments in his small office were a brass nameplate (SOHEIL Y. RAHMALI, M.D.), a plastic houseplant and a framed family portrait on the desk. The portrait showed Rahmali, his hair still uniformly black, standing stonefaced in a suit behind four primly smiling middle-eastern women perched according to age on a stagger of stools. He lifted the phone from its cradle and pressed the flashing red button, raised the phone to his ear. In Persian he said:

“(Hello, butterfly.)”

“(Don’t butterfly me. I’m going to murder someone. These nurses are a spectacular incompetence. My sisters’ husbands are circling like vultures. You should be here with me. You and my goddamned brother, both. I’m tearing my hair out at the roots.)”

“(Oh, don’t make a disaster of that beautiful hair, butterfly. Think of your dear husband. What will I run my fingers through?)”

“(Have all of your white little country sluts gone bald, then? I bet you’re having a field day, aren’t you? Now I know why you stayed behind. Go to the devil, you goat.)”

“(It’s such beautiful hair, really. Just as beautiful now as when we were kids. A man can’t pull his eyes away. It traps him like a spider.)”

“(To the devil, I said, you lecherous old goat.—Lord, here’s vulture number two again. And, look, he’s brought her more flowers. How sweet. Lilies this time, I think. There are so many flowers in that goddamned room you’d think she was already dead.

These sons of jackals. If my brother were here they wouldn't dare. Even you could probably help.)”

“(Hmm. And where is his royal highness? Off saving the world, I take it.)”

“(God, Soh, I *told* you. I told you three times probably. It's another honorary degree in France or Belgium or somewhere. Luxembourg, I don't know. I suppose he'd rather go around preening for white professors than come home to care for his own mother.)”

“(Well, in his defense, there's not much that could be done at this point, butterfly. Even the best—)”

“(How under heaven would you know? The best. You whose specialty is pulling ticks from the dirty asses of the proletariat. My brother *is* the best. They won the Nobel Prize in medicine, for God's sake. He is one of the best, the very best—)”

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“(Don’t butterfly me. I’m going to murder someone. These nurses are a spectacular incompetence. My sisters’ husbands are circling like vultures. You should be here with me. You and my goddamned brother, both. I’m tearing my hair out at the roots.)”

“(Oh, don’t make a disaster of that beautiful hair, butterfly. Think of your dear husband. What will I run my fingers through?)”

“(Have all of your white little country sluts gone bald, then? I bet you’re having a field day, aren’t you? Now I know why you stayed behind. Go to the devil, you goat.)”

“(It’s such beautiful hair, really. Just as beautiful now as when we were kids. A man can’t pull his eyes away. It traps him like a spider.)”

“(To the devil, I said, you lecherous old goat.—Lord, here’s vulture number two again. And, look, he’s brought her more flowers. How sweet. Lilies this time, I think. There are so many flowers in that goddamned room you’d think she was already dead. These sons of jackals. If my brother were here they wouldn’t dare. Even you could probably help.)”

“(Hmm. And where is his royal highness? Off saving the world, I take it.)”

“(God, Soh, I *told* you. I told you three times probably. It’s another honorary degree in France or Belgium or somewhere. Luxembourg, I don’t know. I suppose he’d rather go around preening for white professors than come home to care for his own mother.)”

“(Well, in his defense, there’s not much that could be done at this point, butterfly. Even the best—)”

“(How under heaven would you know? The best. You whose specialty is pulling ticks from the dirty asses of the proletariat. My brother *is* the best. They won the Nobel Prize in medicine, for God’s sake. He is one of the best, the very best—)”

Rahmali seized a piece of paper from the printer tray and now crinkled it next to the receiver to simulate static. He said, “(I think we’re—Honey, you’re—),” then slammed the receiver into its cradle and wheeled violently, fists poised over his head. Rahmali barely restrained his lungs from yelling, in English, Shit! He seethed there bent in the posture of a burdened hunchback, clenching his fists so hard that when he emerged a sweep of three crescentmarks had been engraved like morse code across both palms.

URGENCY

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Hiking up there through the shadowy forest, barefoot over the dirt trail, my torso coated with sweat, I imagined that the eons, the geological forces, the erosion and subduction that had carved out the rise had performed this great labor simply in order that Meadow could walk before me over the trail, so that God could see her there through my eyes, and see us both through the eyes of the squirrels, the trees, the stones, the sky.

If we were alone, I’d usually jump first. I’d tread the jarringly cold water, and in the time it took her to fall to the lake, shining like a sword, decades would pass. That’s what July means. July has nothing to do with calendars. It was with Meadow that I discovered the nature of July, and at El Jefe’s estancia, July never ends. His bull-necked guards enforce July with assault rifles. The laughter, the applause, the clinking glasses

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Hiking up there through the shadowy forest, barefoot over the dirt trail, my torso coated with sweat, I imagined that the eons, the geological forces, the erosion and subduction that had carved out the rise had performed this great labor simply in order that Meadow could walk before me over the trail, so that God could see her there through my eyes, and see us both through the eyes of the squirrels, the trees, the stones, the sky.

If we were alone, I'd usually jump first. I'd tread the jarringly cold water, and in the time it took her to fall to the lake, shining like a sword, decades would pass. That's what July means. July has nothing to do with calendars. It was with Meadow that I discovered the nature of July, and at El Jefe's estancia, July never ends. His bull-necked guards enforce July with assault rifles. The laughter, the applause, the clinking glasses thrum forever in the strings of my guitar. Sometimes, looking out the windows of my

cabana as the moonlight falls across the ocean, I wonder whether I have died and entered some manner of hell.

Afternoons, I sway in my hammock while the crabs scuttle back from the tide. Nights, I play shows at El Jefe's estancia, then cart my guitar back to the cabana under armed guard. I lay behind locked doors listening to the crashing surf. I watch the ceiling fan cut shadows through the moonlight, and I think of Meadow. There are others now—of course there are others—but she's the one whose voice I hear in the palm fronds' susurrations. Without her, none of this would have happened; I would never have become a big star here in Mexico.

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THE ENCOMIUMS

The park was nice on a sunny day. People were there with their doggies and babies. Gretchen had come with her mother—to kill a little time, her mother said. Gretchen thought that was kind of mean, especially considering Uncle Jake.

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One of the clouds in the sky blue sky looked like a double-scoop ice-cream cone, another like a dump-truck or a turtle or a ladybug. Gretchen laughed at that because she was wearing her frilly ladybug skirt. Her mother didn't want her to wear it; she'd said it was September and it was too cold for a skirt, but Gretchen had grabbed Mr. Wiggles the Bear and sat on the edge of her bed pouting. It worked. Even though she couldn't quite make herself cry, Mommy had said okay. Which was great, which was awesome, because Uncle Jake and Aunt Dinah had given her the skirt for a present last Christmas, just before everything bad had started. Wearing her ballet tights it was a little chilly with all the wind in the park, but Gretchen didn't mind because seeing the skirt might make Uncle Jake and Aunt Dinah smile. They used to have big bright smiles, but now their smiles were made of glass.

Gretchen watched the sick-balloon shine, drift, pirouette in the wind. On the front of the balloon, though you couldn't see it now, was a goofy polar bear who resembled Mr. Wiggles. Gretchen had picked it out at Walgreens and bought it at the register all by herself with her allowance money, which was nice and crisp and smelled very good. Mr. Wiggles had special powers, such as making people invisible to monsters, and she thought the balloon could help Uncle Jake recover from his surgery. Gretchen's mother was proud of her for being generous to others instead of using the money to buy stickers for her scrapbook. In the store she smiled so much that Gretchen thought she would cry in front of all the people, but she waited till they got to the car and then cried into the

steering wheel. Gretchen patted her hair and said, “I love you lots and lots, Mommy, lots and lots and lots,” in her little baby voice because sometimes that worked and after all she did love her very much.

Gretchen heard her mother call from the park bench and turned. She was wearing black slacks that fit her legs very well and a nice smooth blouse the same exact color as red rose petals; also her black jacket. She was smoking a cigarette even though she and Gretchen’s father said that was a big no-no and something only unfortunate people did. It would rot your lungs and make you sick and kill you dead. She’d seen the pictures in health class, too; lungs that looked like shriveled-up leeches. Usually she tried to hide the smoking, but Gretchen was very clever and could always smell the nasty smell after. The smoke wafted up in pretty curls, but Gretchen was worried. What if the smoking made her mother like Uncle Jake? If she scolded her now, though, it might make her cry again and her eyes were still puffy and red from in the car.

Gretchen wound the balloon’s ribbon around her fist until the goofy polar bear hovered just above her head. She started towards the park bench and, halfway there, she broke into a skip; maybe all the skipping and smiling would make her mother happier, especially since it was such a nice-smelling day with the ladybug cloud and she was wearing her ladybug skirt.

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Gretchen wound the balloon's ribbon around her fist until the goofy polar bear hovered just above her head. She started towards the park bench and, halfway there, she broke into a skip; maybe all the skipping and smiling would make her mother happier, especially since it was such a nice-smelling day with the ladybug cloud and she was wearing her ladybug skirt.

The park was nice on a sunny day. People were there with their doggies and babies. Gretchen had come with her mother—to kill a little time, her mother said. Gretchen thought that was kind of mean, especially considering Uncle Jake.

The sick-balloon Gretchen was holding caught the sun like a silver coin. Its red ribbon pulled tight against her grip; the balloon was trying to escape. Every soul in the world wanted free. That's why death. That's why Uncle Jake. That's why Uncle Jake's arms were like twigs and his head was giant and bald and yellowy. His eye sockets were like moon craters.

Metastasis was a very pretty word and Gretchen had written it all over three pages of her notebook, in cursive too, with her Little Mermaid pen. Metastasis in her secret code meant the size souls grew to when they got free, a size so big that it was bigger than a hundred septillion Alaskas, which was the biggest state and the only one where polar bears lived. Juneau was its capital but no polar bears lived in Juneau except maybe at the Juneau Zoo.

One of the clouds in the sky blue sky looked like a double-scoop ice-cream cone, another like a dump-truck or a turtle or a ladybug. Gretchen laughed at that because she was wearing her frilly ladybug skirt. Her mother didn't want her to wear it; she'd said it was September and it was too cold for a skirt, but Gretchen had grabbed Mr. Wiggles the Bear and sat on the edge of her bed pouting. It worked. Even though she couldn't quite make herself cry, Mommy had said okay. Which was great, which was awesome, because Uncle Jake and Aunt Dinah had given her the skirt for a present last Christmas, just before everything bad had started. Wearing her ballet tights it was a little chilly with all the wind in the park, but Gretchen didn't mind because seeing the skirt might make Uncle Jake and Aunt Dinah smile. They used to have big bright smiles, but now their smiles were made of glass.

Gretchen watched the sick-balloon shine, drift, pirouette in the wind. On the front of the balloon, though you couldn't see it now, was a goofy polar bear who resembled Mr. Wiggles. Gretchen had picked it out at Walgreens and bought it at the register all by herself with her allowance money, which was nice and crisp and smelled very good. Mr. Wiggles had special powers, such as making people invisible to monsters, and she thought the balloon could help Uncle Jake recover from his surgery. Gretchen's mother was proud of her for being generous to others instead of using the money to buy stickers for her scrapbook. In the store she smiled so much that Gretchen thought she would cry in front of all the people, but she waited till they got to the car and then cried into the steering wheel. Gretchen patted her hair and said, "I love you lots and lots, Mommy, lots

and lots and lots,” in her little baby voice because sometimes that worked and after all she did love her very much.

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EQUATORIAL FORESTS

Upon waking each afternoon Marvin slides two ice cubes into his coffee and stands against the stormbeaten backporch bannister watching the steam from the mug flag and die. Hummingbirds flurry about the blackberry brambles, the same ones each day, it seems to him. Their vim and vigor, their springtime zest, their careless easy greed in the berries makes Marvin wish that he had no infant, no wife, no spittleflecked washrags smelling of breast milk and bile on the arms of what used to be his couch.

The birds hover and flit in whines and whistles. Some people would give them cute little names. His wife, for instance, his partner, as she has recently instructed him to call her, would point the baby's tiny pink finger and bibble-babble wiggity woo.

It is thought, she'd tell the child, in her practiced pedagogical tenor, that Neanderthals may have worn coats woven of songbird feathers when they implored their gods for game. Bright feathers, bright bright bright! Yellow feathers and red ones too.

Feathers of hues that no longer exist in the world. Homo neanderthalis may have even spoken a language of birdlike calls so shrill that invading humans could not hear them. Only doggies woggies and batty watty woos could hear them.

Wiggity woo. Wiggity-wiggity woo!

The Neanderthal is theorized to have been a nocturnal predator, yessie wessie, an apex hunter, bessie doo. Human bones bearing the marks of butchery have been found in Spanish caves near Neanderthal altars. Oh, yes. Yes they have. Yes. Who is Abel? Who is Osiris? One day you'll know. You'll be the one to find out for Mommy. Are you hungry? Eat, darling, eat. Here you go, there I am. Your parents just love your cute little rosy baby cheeks to death. Should we make more of you? Oh yes we should, yes yes yes. My little Neanderthal child. That's it, darling. Eat. Yes. Eat me right up to the Moon.

Among the great roots of the hemlock tree Marvin sees that the neighborhood stray has left him another impressive pile of shit. He will have to bag it, toss it, frown at its dinging thud in the trashcan. Marvin has never seen the dog, only its droppings. In the piles there is sometimes fur. Raccoon, gopher, rabbit, squirrel, old Mrs. Pickle's missing calico; one cannot begrudge a beast his brutality.

More and more often Marvin finds these gifts, always among the hemlock's roots. It is not impossible that the child was conceived there. Signs and omens, auguries of thunder. Hulking cumulonimbus stormclouds engulf wisps of cirrus as they lower upon the hills. Jenny was more flexible when the ring still fit. She'd come away scratched and dappled with sap, breathing wet heavy breaths, the constellations gyring about in her pupils.

God, there's something so deliciously equine about it, she'd say. I once watched a stallion take a fine filly beneath the only tree in Missouri.

As she sung to Marvin in the cool soft dirt her eyelids smelled like wet autumn leaves.

Marvin wants now and then to become a dog, or some Cenozoic forebear of the Eurasian wolf. Clan of the cave bear. Wolf dog, bear dog, wolf whistle cartoons. He, Marvin, Marvin Lawrence Remarque, would bite and growl, never grovel, dash feral through the nighttime swamps, the moongraced jungles, lusting after the footfalls of cottony fawns.

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God, there's something so deliciously equine about it, she'd say. I once watched a stallion take a fine filly beneath the only tree in Missouri.

As she sung to Marvin in the cool soft dirt her eyelids smelled like wet autumn leaves.

Marvin wants now and then to become a dog, or some Cenozoic forebear of the Eurasian wolf. Clan of the cave bear. Wolf dog, bear dog, wolf whistle cartoons. He, Marvin, Marvin Lawrence Remarque, would bite and growl, never grovel, dash feral through the nighttime swamps, the moongraced jungles, lusting after the footfalls of cottony fawns.

Upon waking each afternoon Marvin slides two ice cubes into his coffee and stands against the stormbeaten backporch bannister watching the steam from the mug flag and die. Hummingbirds flurry about the blackberry brambles, the same ones each day, it seems to him. Their vim and vigor, their springtime zest, their careless easy greed in the berries makes Marvin wish that he had no infant, no wife, no spittleflecked washrags smelling of breast milk and bile on the arms of what used to be his couch.

The birds hover and flit in whines and whistles. Some people would give them cute little names. His wife, for instance, his partner, as she has recently instructed him to call her, would point the baby's tiny pink finger and bibble-babble wiggity woo.

It is thought, she'd tell the child, in her practiced pedagogical tenor, that Neanderthals may have worn coats woven of songbird feathers when they implored their gods for game. Bright feathers, bright bright bright! Yellow feathers and red ones too. Feathers of hues that no longer exist in the world. Homo neanderthalis may have even

spoken a language of birdlike calls so shrill that invading humans could not hear them. Only doggies woggies and batty watty woos could hear them.

Wiggity woo. Wiggity-wiggity woo!

The Neanderthal is theorized to have been a nocturnal predator, yessie wessie, an apex hunter, bessie doo. Human bones bearing the marks of butchery have been found in Spanish caves near Neanderthal altars. Oh, yes. Yes they have. Yes. Who is Abel? Who is Osiris? One day you'll know. You'll be the one to find out for Mommy. Are you hungry? Eat, darling, eat. Here you go, there I am. Your parents just love your cute little rosy baby cheeks to death. Should we make more of you? Oh yes we should, yes yes yes. My little Neanderthal child. That's it, darling. Eat. Yes. Eat me right up to the Moon.

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VITA

JASON EDWIN MOLESKY

EDUCATION

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RELEVANT EXPERIENCE

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Courses: Beginning Fiction Workshop, Introduction to Creative Writing

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National Merit Scholarship, 2003 – 2007

SERVICE and INVOLVEMENT

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Yalobusha Review Fiction Reader, 2013 – 2015