

Fantastic Intrusions: The Fantastic as a Concretization of Human Hardship

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**Abstract**

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This essay explores the role of the fantastic in both historical and contemporary works. The essay delves into the questions: What does it mean when the fantastic appears in a work of fiction? What does the fantastic bring to the work that cannot be achieved with straight realism? How does the fantastic achieve what it does? The essay takes a broad overview of how the fantastic has been used, from ancient fairy tales all the way to how it is being used currently, in an attempt to answer these questions.

## Fantastic Intrusions: The Fantastic as a Concretization of Human Hardship

Unicorns. Fairy godmothers. A talking raven with only one answer. Wolves at the crossroads. These are among the oldest of stories, which create “the cultural legacy that we still draw on today to frame our ideas about courtship, romance, and marriage, to reflect on our fantasies about wealth, power, and social mobility, or to work through our anxieties about loss, peril, and death” (Annotated Brothers Grimm xli). But this begs the question, why? Why do so many stories use the fantastic to accomplish their goals? Why are we so invested in occurrences out of the ordinary? What do these fantastic motifs bring to the works they appear in, that could not be accomplished with pure realism? The very word fantastic begins to hint at an answer; the Oxford Dictionary webpage gives the etymology of “fantastic” as “from Old French fantastique, via medieval Latin from Greek phantastikos, from phantazein make visible.” But what, then, does the fantastic make visible? The fantastic seems to reliably show up when a tale approaches commonplace human hardships, from grieving, to paradigm shifts, to entering or leaving a relationship. These are often the largest of life transitions – becoming an adult with an awareness of sexuality, marriage (and separation), or the loss of a parent – and the fantastic makes the difficulty of each situation visible in a way otherwise difficult to achieve. Here we will examine stories from fairy tales all the way down to the modern era, specifically investigating those that Farah Medlesohn defines as Intrusion Fantasies, in which the fantastic is the “bringer of chaos... the beast in the bottom of the garden.” These stories explore what happens when the fantastic intrudes into what is otherwise a realistic story, as that is most relevant to my own work. While a great deal of this is about defining what the fantastic is, this essay is equally about what the fantastic isn't. The fantastic doesn't come with all the baggage that human characters inevitably

bring. It isn't about motivations. It isn't about the backstory that brought all the characters in the story to their particular juncture. The fantastic isn't change – or rather, the fantastic doesn't change. The fantastic makes clear that, just as in everyday life, the protagonist cannot control what the other characters do. Instead, they can only respond, and change themselves. When the fantastic appears in the stories examined here, it always has to do with the most fundamental aspects of human experience, concretizing the human hardships that occur around major life transitions, and facilitating a discussion of how people cope with them.

The fantastic is frequently used to represent a dangerous situation, especially one that may not at first appear to be dangerous to the characters, particularly children, involved. The effect of this is twofold; first, the danger becomes obvious, and second, casting the danger in another, more palpable form facilitates the storyteller's ability to talk about danger. The wolf in the earliest recorded version of the Little Red Riding Hood tale type, called "The Story of Grandmother," fulfills both of these roles of fantastic intrusions. He gives the teller of the story a short hand, a way of concretizing the risk inherent in letting strange men you meet at the crossroads know where you're going by casting the stranger as a literal predator. He thus catalyzes the little girl's no-doubt tumultuous transformation from trusting child to wary adult. While by the second sentence the little girl does make a naïve decision to tell the wolf her destination, this is also an understandable action for a child, and the story passes no judgment on the victim of the wolf. By the end of the tale, however, the little girl is able to recognize the wolf for what he is, a predator in more than the most literal sense. Contrary to her earlier naiveté in giving the wolf information, the little girl uses cleverness and ingenuity to trick the wolf and escape. She tells him she has to "go" and refuses to do so in the bed, and so he allows her outside. There, she attaches the wool rope he tied around her leg to a tree, and makes it back to

her house before he can chase her down again (CFT 11). The little girl achieves her new understanding of the wolf's nature with the help of a second talking creature, a cat who tells her that she is a "slut" if she cedes to the wolf's demands of eating her granny's flesh and blood, which the wolf has stored in the pantry (CFT 10). The epithet "slut" seems an odd one, but the very next sentence appears to confirm it is exactly the word of choice, when the wolf tells the little girl to take off her clothes, burn them, and climb into bed with him naked, on the premise that she "won't be needing [her clothes] any longer" (CFT 11). Until this point the wolf never actually specifies what he wants from the little girl, although consumption seemed the obvious threat. The story facilitates a discussion of the dangers of meeting strange males in the woods by casting the wolf as a predatory animal rather than a predatory man. No reader questions the wolf's motives, nor does anyone expect that he will behave any differently than the way that he does. When the predator is a wolf instead of a human, the horrifying question of why anyone would do such a thing to a little girl can be put to the side. Instead, the story is about the little girl learning how to navigate the dangerous situation the wolf puts her in. The wolf's demands lead this version of the tale to a very different conclusion, no valiant woodsman comes along to save this little girl. Instead a kind of transformation, with the metaphorical wolf as its catalyst, comes over her from the beginning of the story to the end, enabling her to replace her polite and child-like trust with the wariness of an adult.

A similar transformation as Little Red Riding Hood, from child to adult, takes place in the princess of "The Frog King," although the titular frog isn't as obviously dangerous as the wolf. Over the course of the tale, the princess goes from being frightened of the frog and his implications for her emerging sexuality (Pullman 6) – the difficult transition which the frog concretizes – to choosing to lie down next to his handsome self when he lands, prince-ified, in

her bed, herself transformed into an adult. Although the frog lacks the predatory nature of the wolf, he makes up for it in being pushy, disgusting (ABG 10) and, as Tatar points out in her note to the text, frequently associated with genitals by critics when discussing this tale because of his clamminess and skin-texture (ABG 6). These features make him seem more suitable to a discussion of the fears inherent in this kind of life transition than a slimy adolescent boy, who might otherwise draw readers' sympathy away from the princess's plight. The frog's very nature is a short hand for the princess's fears; he is a distillation of the frightening parts of becoming a sexual adult, rather than another human also going through a similar transition. The princess promises the frog that she will give him whatever he wants when he rescues her favorite toy from a well – another understandably childish action with lasting adult repercussions – for what the frog wants is not her gold nor crown nor jewels, but to be her companion and to eat from her dish and drink from her cup and share her bed (ABG 6). In the end of the story, however, it is the princess's efforts, significantly, that are rewarded rather than the aggressive frog's. He continues to harass the princess to keep her promise and let him into her bed until he pushes her to her breaking point and she hurls him against a wall, and the hideous pushy frog is transformed into a prince with whom the princess is happy to share her bed. While this may seem to be in opposition to the premise that the fantastic doesn't change, it is not really the fantastic that changes. Had the frog remained a frog, he would have behaved no differently. As soon as he becomes a human, however, the fantastic is no longer a factor. He can change. As Tatar points out, the princess's action "endorses defiance and passion... Set in a time when 'wishes still come true,' it also upholds the value of action" (ABG, 3). Pullman speculates that the frog's desire to share the princess's bed is related to the now-common idea that the princess must kiss the frog in order to transform him, for "what else is the implication of his wishing to share [her] bed?"

(Pullman 8). While kissing a frog would undoubtedly be a disgusting endeavor, this tale highlights the deeper hardship the princess goes through as she becomes an adult. If there is a moral in this story, it seems to be here; this is a story about how one girl was rewarded for her actions dealing with both her fears regarding her emerging sexuality, and a pushy, disgusting male in the form of a fantastic talking frog.

“Cinderella” and “Donkeyskin,” offer slightly different iterations on the theme of becoming an adult. Rather than a fantastic beast, both use fantastic clothing to disguise the protagonist as a concretization of her need to escape the circumstances of her childhood. Both princesses in these two related tale types transition from powerless children to powerful adults, however the reason for needing disguise and thus by extension the role that the fantastic plays is very dissimilar between the two, showing how the same fantastic feature can take on different meanings and become a short hand for different hardships. As Tatar points out, while the narratives “seem virtually unrelated at first glance, the plots of ‘Cinderella’ type stories are driven by the anxious jealousy of biological mothers and stepmothers... the plots of ‘Catskin’ tales are fueled by the sexual desires of fathers” (CFT 102), the two stories use the same fantastic element to propel them towards their conclusion, the gift of clothing by a supernatural mother-figure, either the ghost of a deceased mother or a fairy godmother (Pullman 127). In the Brothers’ Grimm version of the “Cinderella” tale, three dresses the color of starlight, moonlight, and sunlight respectively allow Cinderella to go to balls and meet the prince (CFT 119), revealing her inner worth and providing a way of escaping her unfortunate situation. But they are also a means of advancing herself, of catching up to and even bypassing what her life would have been like if her mother had not died, highlighting the crucial need for a mother-figure to be the one to offer Cinderella this social advancement from beyond the grave. In Perrault’s

“Donkeyskin,” however, the role of the dresses serves a different initial purpose, embodying the unthinkable situation her father puts her in and catalyzing the princess to escape from it. Here, the princess’s fairy godmother suggests that the princess demand three impossible-to-create dresses, one the color of seasons, one the color of the moon, and one the color of the sun (CFT 111) as a way of avoiding marriage to her father. After making a promise to his dying wife to only marry someone more beautiful and charming than she was, the princess’s father madly decided that his daughter is the only option, showing again how it must be a mother figure to try and rectify the princess’s situation. Unfortunately, the king is able to procure the three impossible dresses, casting the dresses as a manifestation of the extreme amount of power he has over his daughter’s future, which the fantastic fairy godmother has tried to counteract. When her plan fails, the fairy godmother instructs the princess to ask instead for the skin of his Master Donkey, who excretes gold rather than dung (CFT, 109) as “It is so hideous that no one will ever believe it covers anything beautiful” (CFT 112), allowing the princess to take back the power from her father and enabling her escape. “Donkeyskin” is thus an interesting reversal of “Cinderella,” who goes from hideously disguised and therefore powerless to beautiful and powerful enough to change her class status, while the princess in “Donkeyskin” goes from beautiful but powerless to hideously disguised but empowered. Both stories, therefore, have to do with gains and transfers of power only possible with the aid of the fantastic, in the form of the clothing the princesses wear and the mother figures who aid them.

As the previous stories demonstrate, the moment of transition from child to adult often (although not always) coincided with the occasion of marriage, another fundamental life transition. The inclusion of the fantastic seems to facilitate storytellers’ abilities to discuss the many stages of a marriage, from newlyweds to the newly divorced, to grieving for a lost love. It

accomplishes this by making the circumstances surrounding the characters involved immutable, and therefore only allowing the characters to respond to their situation rather than expect that the situation will change. Angela Carter, a more recent author, repurposed fairy tales to suit a discussion of the risks still inherent entering a marriage, showing how the fantastic, even in retelling an old tale, can be manipulated to suit both the author's needs and the current times. In her most famous story, "The Bloody Chamber," Carter retells the story of "Bluebeard," a figure who appears to have been birthed out of women's collective cultural anxieties about marriage and married life. Throughout Carter's tale, the narrator is compelled to seek the knowledge she lacks about the husband she felt obliged by poverty (Carter 7) to marry without truly knowing him, a circumstance that unfortunately still occurs today. She sets out to discover her husband's true nature by ransacking his desk, in which she finds a file. She says, "I had the brief notion that his heart, pressed flat as a flower, crimson and thin as tissue paper, lay in this file. It was a very thin one," (Carter 26), and then finally makes her way to the door at the bottom of a tower, which unlocks to her key. Bluebeard, and Carter's antagonist in "The Bloody Chamber," murders each of his previous wives and plans to do the same to the heroine, his newest bride, as soon as she disobeys him by unlocking the forbidden door and discovering the corpses of her predecessors. The key she uses is the only truly fantastic element in the tale, retaining the stain of the blood she inevitably drops it in no matter how many times she washes it (CFT 146). The recurring motif of this fantastic key, "enchanted" is Perrault's word (CFT 146), irreparably stained and discolored, physically manifests the permanent knowledge that the protagonist gains by using it. This is a bit different than the previous stories, in which the fantastic element was a character itself in the story. Although the key is slightly more metaphorical, the same principle still applies. The heroine's knowledge of her husband's nature cannot be questioned, and cannot be undone.

Furthermore, that knowledge demands that the heroine take action to save herself. Carter's use of the blood-stained key, along with its accompanying modern and innocent-seeming paraphernalia such as files, desks, and paperwork, shows how marriages without either party truly understanding the secrets of the other beforehand still occur. Secrets even as small and ordinary as those found in thin files can nonetheless lead to marital rifts and estrangement. In so doing, Carter reemphasizes the indelible stain on the key as the stain on the protagonist's consciousness rather than evidence of any moral downfall, which is certainly how it functions for Bluebeard. "Bluebeard" appears to be an amalgamation of the collective fantasy of the folk (CFT 138) and in his tales, the fantastic manifests very real fears and anxieties that women experience when entering a marriage, which would be "hardly surprising in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, where women married at a young age, where the mortality rate for women in childbirth was high, and where a move away from home might rightly be charged with fears about isolation, violence, abuse, and marital estrangement" (CFT 140). These are fears that, as Carter aptly points out through her use of the key in "The Bloody Chamber," still hover at the edges of consciousness even in modern times.

The titular unicorn in Manuel Gonzales's 2013 story, "One Horned and Wild Eyed," from his short story collection *The Miniature Wife*, allows the author to explore issues that arise in marriages after the wedding is over, the transition from the so-called "honeymoon period" to the realities of everyday life with another person. The unicorn acts not so much as a substitution for a mistress, although that is the obvious parallel, but as the personification of everything emotionally new and fresh and interesting without involving sexual attraction. She is a contrast to the emotionally unsupported, stagnating marriages in the story. The fact is, Mano is bored. And because the unicorn is a unicorn instead of a mistress, there are no questions about whether

or not she is better than Mano's wife, Sheila, in some way. She isn't Mano's high school sweetheart. She isn't a model. She is the embodiment of Mano's boredom, and so, she allows the author to talk about boredom without all the baggage of a mistress. Because of the amount of time Mano spends staring obsessively at the unicorn, which his friend Ralph acquires under unusual circumstances from a "Chinaman" (Gonzales) passing through town, he is home an hour late on a night when Sheila can ill afford his lack of support. In their subsequent exchange, Mano tells her that she looks great, but the emphasis in the conversation, and the tension therein, revolves around Mano's inability to tell his wife what she needs to hear to feel supported. The unicorn becomes a short hand for how Mano has transitioned to no longer thinking about their relationship, as often happens in relationships that have aged a bit, and is no longer considering how he could best support Sheila. The depth of Mano's distraction becomes obvious when Gonzales writes, "'Ralph's got this new thing,' I said, taking Victor back from her. 'I'm sure he does,' she said. She found her purse and then her keys. 'This is,' I said. 'Different'... 'I shouldn't be too late,' she said, 'but if he gets hungry, there's food for him in the fridge.' 'I mean, really, pretty different,' I said.'" The focus of each character here is clear, Sheila is intent on the practicalities of running her household, and on getting out the door to her new job, while Mano can only talk about one thing. Neither character is listening to what the other is saying, showing how the unicorn manifests the emotional stagnation both characters suffer, and how neither party is now the other's top priority. While the unicorn is not a mistress as such, although she is very much alive and very feminine, she embodies the emotional stagnation that Mano and Sheila experience in their marriage.

Kelly Link explores the territory one step beyond Gonzales and his unicorn in "The Great Divorce," from her collection, *Magic for Beginners*. Link deeply accesses the emotions that

revolve around the ending of a relationship by framing the story with the ultimate incompatibility, in a way that only the fantastic could accomplish. "The Great Divorce," encompasses two tales of marriage between the living and the dead. In the frame story, the fantastic element is the dead wife, Lavvie Tyler. Her ghostly state allows her living husband, Alan Robley, to make his feelings towards divorce literal in a conversation with their couple's counselor, using stereotypical statements one hears around the end of a relationship. Alan says such things as, "I don't know if Lavvie bounces when she walks, or if she trips over things, or if she still thinks my jokes are funny, or if she even listens when I'm talking. If she's even there. Or if she just laughs at me when I'm yelling at her. I don't know when she's being sarcastic or when I've really hurt her feelings or when she's teasing me" (Link 191-192). Half of these statements have to do with Alan's literal inability to see his dead wife, but they are also a commentary on his metaphorical inability to "see," i.e., to know his wife. Lavvie's ghostliness embodies Alan's inability to understand her and, by extension, the reasons he wants a divorce. By making Lavvie a ghost, Link demonstrates that some incompatibilities are irresolvable in a way that would be difficult to accomplish if Lavvie were an ordinary, living wife. Furthermore, Alan goes on to say that, "Some days I don't even feel like the kids are mine. I love them to pieces, but it's hard for me, thinking they don't really belong to me. They already spend so much time with their mother. Who knows what she says to them about me" (Link 190). This stereotypical statement becomes a comical parody when one remembers that the children are also dead, and that to communicate with their father at all, they must use the household planchette and Ouija board (Link 187). While Alan's statements may be comical, they also allow Link space to make literal Alan's problems with marriage by replacing the normal emotional separation of couples in Alan's situation with absolute physical and communicatory separation. In so doing, the fantastic brings

the reader's attention back to the seemingly commonplace grief and troubles that people experience, highlighting how tragic and impactful these types of problems can be by concretizing the incompatibilities between Alan and Lavvie. Later, Link introduces a second couple to explore another facet of this divide, together thirty years until she died and, "As far as she was concerned, the marriage was over. But Callahan couldn't let go" (Link 193), Link uses the fantastic to give herself room to talk about the repercussions of a marital split. One partner considers the relationship to be over (and for good, literal reasons), while the other clings to her memory. When Callahan says, "'Don't you know how much I love you?' She knew... But what did how much matter do a dead woman?" (Link 195), it shows that feelings involved in the split are true, common feelings that lead to and surround the dissolution of a relationship, as well as being an interesting reversal of the stereotypical ghost story. Link's use of the fantastic in both these stories underscores the total emotional, physical and communicatory separation that both couples feel to explore the effect that insurmountable incompatibilities can have on relationships when the participants are looking divorce in the face.

Edgar Allan Poe brings into play the final emotional element in a separation of married people – grieving for the love that was lost. Poe perhaps epitomized the use of fantastic elements as keys to exploring and understanding inner turmoil by making it visible externally. In his most famous work, the fantastic raven in Poe's poem of the same name plays perhaps the most prominent role. Here, the fantastic is held up as a mirror to the mind of the human protagonist of the poem, and allows the reader to explore both the mindset of a person who believes most strongly in the worst-case scenario, and a man in the depths of grief. The narrator is a man caught in the middle of his transition from being a person in a relationship to a person who is once again alone in life. The narrator believes the raven to be an emissary from the devil (Poe

380), and while it undoubtedly becomes one, it is the devil of the narrator's own consciousness, concretizing his grief and transitional state, rather than an external evil acting upon him. It is the force that compels him to engage the raven in escalating statements, from "Other friends have flown before / On the morrow *he* will leave me as my Hopes have flown before' / Then the bird said, 'Nevermore'" (Poe 379) all the way to "Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn, / It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore / ... Quoth the raven, 'Nevermore'" (Poe 381). The inclusion of the fantastic allows the poem to show the character of a man who asks questions for which he knows he will receive the worst possible answer based on prior indicators – the raven becomes a glorified Magic 8-Ball with only one answer, which the narrator uses to confirm his own worst fears. The raven externalizes the way the narrator responds to the loss of his love, the transition from being in a relationship to being, once again, alone in life, and in so doing, confirms the narrator's existential terror about this state of existence.

The fantastic seems particularly apt to facilitating a discussion the different ways people grieve, as Poe demonstrates with a lost love. While grieving can take many forms and spring from many sources, nearly every person must face grieving for the loss of their parents and grandparents, a third tumultuous life event that the fantastic can be used to concretize. In the first story in Kelly Link's collection, *Magic For Beginners*, the narrator, Genevieve, searches for her grandmother's faery handbag. Her belief in the fantastic nature of the handbag allows the story to become a contemplation of grief and the way that the narrator clings to the hope, almost to the point of denial, that she will meet her lost grandmother again one day. The story begins with an obsessive search for a lost object – and by extension, the lost Grandmother Zofia – which Zofia has promised (with some collaborative evidence) contains the fantastic. While the reader may be

predisposed to expect fantastic intrusions to bring chaos into their stories, “The Faery Handbag” reverses this expectation; the loss of the faery handbag brings more chaos than its presence. Over the course of the story, the narrator suffers several losses, each one building up the handbag as the narrator’s way of dealing with her grief through hope and denial. This begins with the loss of her grandmother’s love, Rustan, her own grandfather-figure. According to Zofia, Rustan must return to the handbag, prompting Genevieve to speculate, “I thought about how the next time I saw him, I might be Zofia’s age, and he would only be a few days older. The next time I saw him, Zofia would be dead. Jake and I might have kids. That was too weird” (Link 14). Grief is unmistakably present in the gaps between the life events Genevieve thinks about – Rustan won’t be there for her grandmother’s death, or the birth of her children, but her denial is also strongly present. No matter what, Genevieve insists that Rustan will return from the handbag. Then, Genevieve’s friend Jake disappears, and “Everyone thinks Jake ran away, except for my mother who is convinced that he... is probably lying at the bottom of a lake somewhere. She hasn’t said that to me, but I can see her thinking it” (Link 18). Once again Genevieve copes with her grief by believing that instead Jake disappeared into the handbag, increasing the stakes for her later search. To help calm Genevieve down about Jake’s disappearance, Zofia says that ““I have a plan... I will go find Jake. You will stay here and look after the handbag.’ ‘You won’t come back either,’ I said. I cried even harder” (Link 19). Despite her state of denial, Genevieve’s true fears – that she won’t see Rustan or Jake or her grandmother again – come bubbling to the surface. Instead of entering the handbag as Rustan and Jake seem to have done, however, Zofia is rushed to the hospital and dies, and in their rush both Zofia and Genevieve leave the handbag behind (Link 22). Although Genevieve acknowledges that Zofia has died, she nonetheless continues to cling to the hope that the handbag concretizes when she says, “Maybe Zofia sent

part of herself in there with the skinless dog. Maybe she fought it and won and closed the handbag. Maybe she made friends with it. I mean, she used to feed it popcorn at the movies. Maybe she's still in there" (Link 22). The obvious parallel is that the handbag encompasses a kind of afterlife, but because it is fantastic it comes without any religious overtones. Instead, the fantastic refocuses the story onto Genevieve coping with the grief of her losses by hoping that she will meet her family again someday, a form of denial that they are truly gone from her life.

Aimee Bender's story "Marzipan," also deals with grieving, in this instance the inevitable grieving for one's parents. Bender highlights two distinct forms of grieving in the story, and both are given a distinct physical form. The story opens when a hole develops in the narrator's father's stomach, all the way through to his back, one week after her grandfather, his father, has died (Bender 39). Only the fantastic can manifest grief through the appearance of sickening holes in the body, not through the heart, as one might expect, but through the stomach. At the appearance of the hole, the family takes the father to the doctor where they discover that while he may be more porous than is usual he is essentially fine, all his innards can function around the hole in his belly, but the mother is, unexpectedly, pregnant (Bender 41). Her bulging stomach, although opposite of the father's hole, occupies the same space. As if he is trying to recreate his father's missing presence in his life through his new child, the father proposes a name for the baby, "My father, on the couch, one hand curled up and resting inside his stomach like a birdhead, was in good spirits. We'll name it after my dad, he said. If it's a girl? I asked. Edwina, he said" (Bender 41). When the mother gives birth, however, it is her own mother that is born. While one character's parental loss creates a literal hole in him, albeit one that he is still able to function with, the other character's parent reappears, as she has been unable to let go of her grief. This element of the fantastic gains depth of meaning when the mother turns to the narrator and

says, “Honey, she said, when I die? My eyes started to fill up, that fast. Don’t die, I said. I’m not, she said, I’m very healthy. Not for a while. But when I do, she said, I want you to let me go,” (Bender 47). Another way of grieving is being highlighted in the figure of the mother; she is unable to cope with the loss of her mother, and thus her mother literally returns. In both instances, the process of grieving is given physical form, allowing Bender to contemplate and comment on the different ways people respond to the loss of one’s parents that all people must face, sooner or later.

Bender also explores coping with grief that comes much sooner than is expected in “The Girl in the Flammable Skirt.” In this story, the fantastic, a stone backpack, fulfills a broad role about parents handing off their burdens, their hardships, to their children when it is time for the parents to die. When in the opening of the story the protagonist asks, “What’s in this? I asked. This is so heavy. Why is it stone? Where did you get it?” (Bender 173), to which the father responds, “It’s this thing I own, he said” (Bender 173), it is perhaps the first indication that the stone backpack is more than a simple backpack made of rock in the tale. It is both literally present and a physical manifestation of the burden the narrator bears of caring for her ailing father, the burden of grieving repeatedly for him without his actually dying. When the daughter goes to school wearing the stone backpack, the perceptive teacher can see the burden that the father has passed down to his daughter and she brings the narrator a Kleenex, prompting her to say, “I’m not crying, I said. I know, she said, touching my wrist. I just wanted to show you something light” (Bender 174). The stone backpack allows the teacher to literally see the burden the narrator is carrying around, and facilitates her ability to respond in the most appropriate way – Kleenexes as an antidote to the heaviness of the burden of grief. Later, after the father has been checked into the hospital once again and the daughter meets him there and prays for him, she

goes outside and wishes for him to join her and to bring the stone backpack, the burden, with him. She says, “Where is my father already? I want him to come rolling out and hand over that knapsack of his; my back is breaking without it” (Bender 180). At last, the burden has been lifted from the daughter, the state of her father’s health has passed beyond her ability to do anything about it, but it is not a triumph. Instead, it could even be that the father has died. The metaphor of the stone backpack is wonderfully universal, making visible and literal the burden of caring for an ailing father and of grieving for him, as well as more broadly showing the effect of parents handing off their burdens to their children.

Much of this essay has been spent exploring how to understand what the fantastic represents when it appears in a written work. What has not been answered, however, is what the fantastic means for me, personally. When I first started writing stories, it just kept showing up (and continues to show up) in my works, over and over. I wasn’t sure then what it meant, but let me tell you a story and maybe then by the end, we’ll both understand it a little better. When I was an undergraduate, writing my first story in a college-level creative writing course, I met with my teacher at the end of the semester to talk. My general impression of our meeting was that it was good, all was good, everything was fine. “But,” he said then, “why does it have to be a unicorn?” He looked tired. It was the end of the semester, and here I was the person who had emailed him at the beginning of the class and said, “I know you said we aren’t supposed to write genre fiction, but there’s a unicorn in it.” He didn’t make eye-contact. I nodded. This was something I was prepared for, something for which I had emotionally braced myself. There is never supposed to be a unicorn in it. Then I went home, and told my mother all the ways I thought it just *had* to be a unicorn. He, my unicorn, was a short-hand, a way of capturing an ideal without having to laboriously explain it (and what is a unicorn, if not an ideal?). He wasn’t really

there as a character, he was there as a manifestation of my main character, Violet's, inner thoughts/fears/desires. He had to be a unicorn so that I could get busy tearing down that ideal of unicorns. I don't much like unicorns. He had to be a unicorn, so that when he conceded to Violet's point of view at the end, that unchangeable, fixed, immutable image of unicorn-ness, that concession would be all the more meaningful. He just had to be a unicorn. But, as you, dear reader, are probably able to tell by now, that question never let go of me. Why does he have to be a unicorn? Why does it have to be a wolf, or a frog, or a set of really fabulous dresses, or a ghost, or a stone backpack? Why does the fantastic have to be fantastic?

Now I think the fantastic is all of these things, and more. It is a short hand. It is a manifestation of a character's inner turmoil. It is an ideal, and it is the tearing-down of that ideal. It is an immutable point, which forces the characters to change around it. It is ultimately outside of the characters' control, as so much in life is. And, crucially, no one expects that it behave any differently than the way that it does. The raven will never say anything but "Nevermore." When we use the fantastic in a story, it is using what is more than human (or less than human, depending on your perspective) to talk about the most basic, fundamental, primal aspects of human existence, the life transitions that don't end at happily ever after. And because it is fantastic, we are able to do so without any questions of motivation or history or current events or cultural context that humans bring to every story they enter. When a story element is a human instead of a raven, or a wolf, or a frog, or a ghost, there is always a question of, "why?" Why does Humbert Humbert do what he does to Lolita? Humans carry so much baggage with them. No one asks "why?" of the wolf. A wolf is a predator is a wolf. No one, including the characters in the story, expect that the wolf will change his ways. Without that expectation, the horror of the little girl's situation takes a backseat to the reality of her learning to cope with that situation. So

many people refuse to read *Lolita*, but everyone knows Red Riding Hood. Without the question of “why,” when the fantastic operates as a fixed point that characters must change around, a clearer discussion can be had of how people deal with different situations. From transitioning from a child to an adult with an awareness of sexuality, to marriage and all the potential pitfalls therein, to grieving for lost parents, what the fantastic makes visible is always, always the most human part of the story.

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