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Nightworld

Susan Renee Falco
Florida International University, sfalc005@fiu.edu

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

NIGHTWORLD

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Susan Falco

2020

To: Dean Maureen A. Donnelly
College of Arts, Sciences, and Education

This thesis, written by Susan Falco, and entitled *Nightworld*, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgement.

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

Maneck H. Daruwala

Julie Marie Wade

Lester Standiford, Major Professor

Date of Defense: November 10, 2020

The dissertation of Susan Falco is approved.

Dean Maureen A. Donnelly
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

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

Florida International University, 2020

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

NIGHTWORLD

by

Susan Falco

Florida International University.

Miami, Florida

Professor Lester Standiford, Major Professor

Nightworld is a collection of short and flash fiction pieces exploring cycles of violence and redemption. Variations in the length and style are meant to create a formally experimental continuation of the Southern Gothic tradition. Mythic heroes from Robert Johnson to Shirley Temple populate this fictional landscape of musicians, acrobats, reverends, stray children, and wild animals. Predatory wildlife reflects on the inherent violence in biology. The title story follows a pair of musicians on a night when a near fatal overdose fails to provide a catalyst for change. In Nightworld, the characters choose the myth of the Self Destructive Artist over their own futures. I am drawn to the brutal and spare beauty of Dennis Johnson, the uninhibited language of William Faulkner, and Mary Carr's ability to tell reflect on violence with humor and perspective. I want my characters to find beauty, and even the sublime hand of a higher power, in their fractured world.

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You Break It, You Own It

The boy stands bare-chested in the creek mud, his white stomach clenched with cold. His skin is drum taught and tiger striped in red welts, the switch's kiss. He buries his feet in the black mud. His daddy says this part of the woods is Indian-cursed. The oak leaves and acorns are black, and the squirrels evolved black to better blend into the tree's tarry bark. He looks up as a black Grackle caws.

His cousin is kneeling in the shadows under an old oak tree. She's built a pyramid of onyx acorns, and she whispers quietly to herself while experimenting with balance, feeling the invisible power catch when she aligns the gravity just so with her small fingers. The boy dives down to the silty bottom and rolls over to watch the shadow play of the breeze and leaf and light filtering down from the canopy through the water. He rolls again and presses his face and stomach into the cold creek-bed muck, then kicks and shoots towards his cousin, a blind bullet. He surfaces, water and bits of black leaf muck sheathing off his goose-bumped marble skin. Blue veined marble with welted red stripes. "I am a crocodile," he says, eyes flat blue glass, as still as any stalking thing's. He shoots out an arm, swipes the pyramid down. Her carefully weighed invisible bonds vanish.

She starts to cry but a branch cracks and his daddy steps into the clearing. She bites her tongue and makes a smile shape. The boy drops back into the water and freezes like a

tiny soldier who has just heard the rifle-stock of a sniper. The black water ripples just beneath his eyes, blond hair swirling in the current.

“Time to get” daddy says.

In the bed of his pickup truck the wind whips both kids’ hair and they watch Tennessee flying away behind them. “Where are we going?” she asks, but the wind eats her words. The boy turns to her anyway, eyes blue glass marbles: part lizard and part fairy-prince. Part glass-eyed pirate and part crocodile. Won’t say “don’t know.”

The truck parks, and the kids clamber over the tailgate, following the boy’s daddy to a shop window full of crystal. The man’s shadow is tall as a giant on the pavement, the kid’s shadows trailing behind him. The slanted orange light passes through the shop window, gets caught in thousands of facets and shoots back blinding. The setting sun blazing and shattered.

Inside it is cool, and little herds of miniature animals are frozen on the countertops, the ghosts of things that sniffed lion scent and turned to ice. The girl steps carefully, hands clasped behind her back.

“Look with your eyes, not with your hands,” the lady says. The cups and plates look sharp enough to cut you if you drink or eat from them. There is a crystal deer like the one his Daddy killed, but clean and clearer than ice. No organs, no blood. Shining. The lady points to a sign, pronounces the words slowly: *You Break it, You Own it.*

From the ceiling hangs the largest object in the shop, a star of many blade-like points spinning slowly in the draft of musty air-conditioning. The boy cranes his head back to stare, dust motes glowing holy in the salmon light. He can imagine the points under his fingers:

would they cut you or melt away? Does a star have a tiny mouth like a starfish? Like the one we had as a Christmas decoration until it started to rot? Granddaddy Biggs told them how starfish have tiny mouths and suck their food inside in teeny tiny bites. He decides this star must be made of diamonds, so it is probably the most valuable thing in the world. He can never have it. He can never have anything like it.

But what if the sign is a message for him, a secret code? He sees this is a thing he can have, because *You Break It You Own It*. It would still be beautiful in lots of pieces, and it would be his. A broom leans slanted like a drunk against the counter. He already hears how the star will sing as it breaks, sees how the light will spill, and fill the room with jagged rainbow makers to stuff in his pockets, to hold, to look at, to cut people with.

As it falls the room fills with tiny angels singing and shrieking. Daddy grips the boy's shoulders and lifts him, shakes him in the singing air. Daddy leans forward as if to kiss the boy's cheek, but his mouth pulls away running bright blood. The girl sees him spit a ruby of flesh on to the dark linoleum and she thinks it shines brighter than anything.

But nothing is blazing quite like the boy, he is radioactive with the message he has clearly just been sent, the riddle he solved. He can have the whole damn world, anything he can break.

Reverend Red and The Wildcats

The sound of claws on metal sickened him. Reverend Red was rocking in his Lazy Boy when he heard it rise from beneath his feet. He realized his poison had failed to kill them. Two wildcats, the old Tom missing one eye, had been tearing around under the trailer's foundation for three nights now. He didn't know what they wanted. Thirsty and trying to reach the water in the pipes? Marking out the space as theirs? Mating? The noise sounded like demons trying to come up through the floor.

Red took the shotgun from above the door and stepped into the rain, droplets glowing red under the porch's bulb. He stooped down to look underneath. Three red eyes shone back at him, as if from a single creature. He stumbled backwards, then fired two shots into the night sky. He didn't want to shoot out his own gas or water lines by mistake, just because he was spooked, but he hoped the noise would scare the motherfuckers off. What were they doing down there? What did they want with him? It felt personal. It made no sense. Or worse, it made too much sense.

The kids should be here by now. Red propped open the door so he could watch for the wildcats while he waited. Waiting was hell for an old man in pain, so he made a game out of trying to follow the path of a single red-lit raindrop in the darkness. But he always lost sight of it. The sickness was setting in now, coming on mean. First waves of fever heat would build under his skin and a sweat that smelled like fear seeped out. The sweat would freeze and his skin would break into goosebumps, muscles trembling as if shot through with electricity. Like a life force perverted, something sick and cruel. Tears and mucous rolled down over his lips, but his hand felt too heavy to lift and wipe his face. He yawned again and again, as if choking for oxygen, yawned till his jaw ached but still couldn't get enough air. Bouts of compulsive sneezing racked his body.

The kids were bringing him pain pills from the Dark Web. *The Dark Web*. To Red, it sounded like something he might have written a sermon about in the old days, when his congregation hung on his words. Those were good days. That was before he realized who it was that was really walking beside him. Deer were common enough, but sometimes when he saw their cloven tracks in the dust it looked like proof. Footprints of the one who was walking alongside him these last years. The Reverend Red had not preached in many years. His fall from grace a story the town whispered, kept hidden out of respect for his mother and father. Perhaps they tried to forget him because of their own shame, the shame of having had any part of him. The town knew his parents as decent people, and small towns are proud of their decency. Red's parents were solid members of that network of old timers. Their beliefs had been steadfast for centuries. They who went to church every Sunday, who held their judgements tight and silent behind their eyes. The town looked away and allowed

Red his plot of dirt, knowing his shame would shadow him until his last breath. They expected that last breath would come soon.

Maybe it was spite that kept him going, but Red was unkillable. It was as if he had made a pact with the devil. He'd inject cocaine till his ears rang and his vision went black, then he'd do it again. He chewed Phentanol patches like breath strips, ate Little Debbie's and never filled his insulin. He galled and needled the violent and insane, and yet he lived and lived and lived. It was as if Death himself was too disgusted with Red to come to call. Red's continued existence was the kind of thing that made even the most faithful person start to ask questions about God and His methods.

Every minute that passed he began to hate the kids a little more, but he forgave them as soon as the red headlights swung through the rain, bounced over the railroad tracks and lit his old Dodge Dart. Their bodies made dark shapes in the red rain as they stepped from the car. Red leapt up like a child waiting for gifts, raising the shotgun in a salute.

He laughed when he saw the jump back, eyes wide. "C'mon, it's for the cats, not you."