

3-4-2021

Shadows of the Morning Twilight

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

SHADOWS OF THE MORNING TWILIGHT

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Philip A. LaPadula

2021

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

This thesis, written by Philip A. LaPadula, and entitled Shadows of the Morning Twilight, 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.

John Dufresne

Mark Kelley

Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 4, 2021

The thesis of Philip A. LaPadula 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, 2021

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my father Paschal LaPadula, a published poet, and my mother Mary LaPadula, an avid reader of mystery novels and teacher. They instilled in me an appreciation for literature.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank the members of my committee for their guidance and patience. I want to give special thanks to my major professor, Lynne Barrett, whose positive feedback and detailed reviews of my work helped me to master creative writing elements such as timelines and plot structures. Prof. John Dufresne's writing workshop and Prof. Mark Kelley's American literature class were invaluable in improving my skills and helping me come up with literary themes. In addition, I would like to thank Prof. Les Standiford for encouraging me to apply to the program and for providing helpful assistance in his workshop on place in fiction. Finally, I am thankful for the inspiring courses of Prof. Debra Dean and Prof. Denise Duhamel.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS
SHADOWS OF THE MORNING TWILIGHT

by

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Florida International University, 2021

Miami, Florida

Professor Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

Shadows of the Morning Twilight is a collection of seven short stories and one novella about men who, facing transitions in their lives and in society, grapple with issues of sexual identity, residency, past traumas, and corruption. In the noir-influenced title novella, Nick Esposito, a mid-1970s journalism student, faces dangerous choices when he reports on the sale of a gay bar that is covertly owned by the mafia. Some characters see themselves as trapped. In *Final Score*, a former football player struggling with dementia finds a reason to live when he mentors a young gay man. In *Psyched*, *Phantoms of Alligator Alley*, and *Blood Brothers*, sudden recognition scenes that draw upon Flannery O'Connor's dramatic structures reveal characters' true identities, leading to new possibilities. *Shadows of the Morning Twilight* examines the surprising ways that characters can connect as secrets spill out into the sunlight, transforming lives.

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Final Score

As Trevor rifles through the drawer, his hands tremble. He tosses items on the floor: yellowed business cards, bits of paper with forgotten names scribbled on them, old photos, programs from long-forgotten events, postcards, a camera with a dead battery. He knows the items once meant something, but like strangers he knows in a dream who are unfamiliar upon waking, their significance has faded. As he sifts through the second drawer, his hands feel detached and begin to move mechanically. He empties the drawer to its dusty bottom, slams it shut, and groans.

He forgets what he is looking for. It slips maddeningly through the cracks in his mind. But he knows it's important.

Trevor walks down a long hallway and steps into a bedroom. A Dali print—the one with the melted clocks—hangs on the wall. A pair of New Balance athletic shoes are on the floor, and two T-shirts with the number 17 on their fronts are folded neatly on the bed. He can't remember whose bedroom it is, but he knows it's a young person's bedroom. He senses the person is no longer living in the room. He sits on the bed in the room for what seems like hours.

For some reason, sitting in the young person's bedroom restarts his stalled memory—and he remembers what he was looking for thirty minutes earlier. He is looking for sleeping pills. He can't remember the name on the bottle or where he put them. He thinks of contacting the doctor who gave him the pills, but he can't remember where the contact information is. Besides, it's all underground—like an underground railroad. He remembers the doctor asking him to verify his time of diagnosis. After all,

the euthanasia doctor is an ethical outlaw. He must find the pills, he thinks. He won't be able to get more.

He has good days and bad days. The doctors are not quite sure whether he has chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) or the less exotic early onset Alzheimer's. Whatever the label, he sometimes knows that he is slowly losing his mind at age sixty-eight, although sometimes he forgets. Doctors suspect that the creeping confusion of his life stems from his days on the gridiron. On a particularly lucid day, he has flashbacks of his time as a college football player and the three years he played in the pros. He remembers being sandwiched by two 240-pound linebackers as he leapt to catch a pass, but he doesn't remember the name of the pro team he played for that year. He remembers giving up football after a painful injury.

He remembers the conversation he had with a history professor who complimented his paper on the ancient Olympics and urged him to pursue a master's in history. He remembers earning a master's degree and a PhD in history, but he can't remember the name of the school where he was a tenured professor. He remembers receiving an award for a bestselling historical novel, but he can't remember the year it was published. He remembers marrying and divorcing, but he can't remember how long it's been since he split with his wife. As if to prove nature's inconsistency, he retains much of his physical appeal—broad shoulders, square jaw, full head of salt-and-pepper hair.

He is standing in the living room, tossing magazines and books from the furniture onto the floor, searching for the TV remote control. He gives up on the remote search and picks up a book with a picture of Roman aqueducts on the cover. His back aches from an

old football injury. He feels like a petrified relic. At this moment, the phone rings. It's his sister Marilyn. "I'm on my way," she says.

"What?"

"I'm coming over today. Remember?"

He doesn't.

"Have you eaten yet?"

"No. Not hungry." He hangs up and resumes the search for the TV remote.

When she enters, they exchange quick, awkward hugs. He serves her instant coffee, and she talks about her plans to move to Boston: "I'm finally going to put my law degree to good use."

"You're a lawyer. I thought you were a . . . uh . . . a teacher."

"I guess you forgot that I graduated from law school a couple of years ago. My late career switch. Remember?"

He doesn't. "What is it you do again?" he asks.

"I've been working part time in the drug diversion program of the state attorney's office here in Fort Lauderdale. Well, I've been offered a full-time position in the drug diversion program in Boston. I can't make it here anymore on a part-time salary. You need to come with me, Trevor. You shouldn't be living here alone. What happens when your condition worsens?"

"I'll manage."

"Trevor, you need to give me power of attorney."

"Aren't you pa . . . powerful enough, dear?"

"Do you want to die here alone?"

“We’re all alone after we’re dead, so we may as well get . . . get used to it. Everyone has his or her own cube . . . cubicle. Coffins built for two are rare, and I can’t think of anyone I’d want to lie next to for eter. . . etern . . .” He can’t find the word and settles for “ever.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Trevor! At least, hire someone to help you out here. Leona’s been gone for a year now.”

After talking for what seems like hours but is actually only about twenty minutes, he reluctantly agrees to let Marilyn hire a home health care aid. Someone will need to be here to find the body in a timely manner, he thinks. He doesn’t want an unpleasant situation for the undertakers. She says she knows of a good agency that will send over someone “to cook your meals and help you take your medications.” He says nothing but thinks he doesn’t need anyone to help him take medicine because he intends not to take any. He has no desire to wither on the vine like rotten fruit. He doesn’t understand why animals are put to sleep to keep them from suffering, but it’s OK to let people suffer.

He doesn’t remember when the Haitian woman, Janine, started working for him. It seems as if she has been there forever. Time has slowed. The Haitian woman hovers over him like an angel of death, pushing pills in front of him, badgering him to eat.

“Time for your medicines, Mr. Trevor,” the Haitian woman says. He forgets her name. “Now, don’t you be no naughty boy, today, hear!”

He can’t deal with the baby talk anymore. He won’t let her put him in diapers! He thinks of searching the drawers again. Maybe the container is in the kitchen. He must find it! He starts rifling through the kitchen cabinets until the Haitian woman stops him.

“What you looking for, Mr. Trevor?” He doesn’t want to tell her, so he acts as though he can’t remember, even though he can. “Go watch TV in the Florida room; I’ll bring your lunch soon.”

He plans to slowly starve himself to death by refusing food. That’s an acceptable way to kill oneself, he thinks. They do it all the time in the hospitals—simply withhold nourishment from a terminal patient, disconnect the feeding tube or respirator. He will save them all the trouble.

But his hunger strike fades fast. The dementia hasn’t dampened his appetite much, and the Haitian woman is a good cook. The smell of the chicken and rice coming from the kitchen is like aromatic torture. After three days of his just nibbling on food, she threatens, “I’ll ship you off to the hospital and have you fed intravenously.”

He can’t remember the summer fading, but there’s a chill in the air now, and the days are shorter. He’s standing by the pond in his back yard watching the koi eat. Their mouths open and close mechanically—like the critters in that old Pac Man game. They dart in all directions and devour the food in seconds.

He is talking to Marilyn, who has somehow appeared in the Florida room. He forgets she no longer lives in Florida. He sees the suitcase in the living room and asks her, “Where are you going?”

She talks about how the outside of the house is a mess. “The weeds are growing wildly, and there’s algae in the pool.” She wants to hire another assistant for the outside. She suggests a kid from the drug diversion program. “His name is Javier. I met him in the program in Fort Lauderdale, and we stayed in touch. . . .