

Vampires in the Lemon Grove Study Guide

Vampires in the Lemon Grove by Karen Russell

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Plot Summary

“Vampires in the Lemon Grove” is a collection of eight contemporary and historic short stories by Karen Russell. The short stories alternately share common themes of horror, death, nature, theft, and the past.

In the title story, “Vampires in the Lemon Grove”, Clyde and his wife, Magreb, both vampires, dwell in Italy where they feast on lemons. Having learned they do not need human blood to survive, and having learned that most information about themselves (such as having to sleep during the day) is mere rumor, Clyde and Magreb have reformed their lives by seeking out food sources other than human blood. Only the 17-year-old girl, Fila, who runs the produce stand at the lemon grove knows that Clyde is a vampire. As time passes, Clyde and Magreb are no longer able to slake their thirst or cure their hunger with lemons. While in town, Clyde runs into Fila and loses control, feeding on her to the point that he kills her. Clyde returns to his wife, wondering how she will think of him now.

In “Reeling for the Empire,” Kitsune has sold herself to an Emperor-approved Japanese silk mill overseen by the Agent. The Agent travels Japan, purchasing girls from families with bad debts, and transforms them into half-human, half-silkworm creatures to reel silk, Japan’s primary export in the late 1800s. Kitsune and the other girls soon tire of being kept locked up and not being paid for their work, so they trap and kill the Agent in a cocoon. They then spin cocoons for themselves so that they may transform into moths.

In “The Seagull Army Lands on Strong Beach, 1979,” Nal is not happy with how the Summer of 1979 is going for him, mainly because his older brother has managed to begin seeing Vanessa, the girl that Nal has long had a crush on. This occurs at the same time the town sees a massive seagull flock land, the largest in history. The seagulls are a nuisance, stealing things left and right from residents. Thinking of the seagulls taking what they want as a part of their nature, Nal preempts his brother from purchasing a ring for Vanessa for her birthday by purchasing the ring himself, and giving it to her. She is thrilled with the gift, and the two have sex. Nal mimics the swirling motion of flying seagulls as he has sex with Vanessa.

In “Proving Up,” Miles Zegner and his homesteading family share a window with their neighbors in late-nineteenth century Nebraska so that they may temporarily install it in their homes when the Inspector comes around. The settlers of Nebraska, living on land provided under the Homestead Act, must meet certain requirements to finally own the land, such as having a glass window in their homes. Miles is sent out to bring the window to the neighbors when word comes that the Inspector will soon appear. Miles is trapped in a freak snowstorm, however, during which time he encounters the dead soul of an earlier settler who takes the window and then steals Miles’s life, saying the window was stolen from someone else.



In “The Barn at the End of Our Term,” a Kentucky barn at some point in the past becomes a wayward place for the souls of U.S. presidents, where they inhabit the bodies of horses. No one can make sense of this, but they all want to escape. Rutherford Hayes eventually figures out that escaping the barn doesn’t mean escaping the body of the horse, just as leaving office doesn’t mean people will remember them for being anything other than presidents.

In “Dougbert Shackleton’s Rules for Antarctic Tailgating,” Dougbert journeys to Antarctica each year with friends from around the world to watch the whales eat krill. The visitors choose sides –for Team Whale or Team Krill. Dougbert explains that rooting for Team Krill is a tough job, but it is one that must be done.

In “The New Veterans,” Beverly, a massage therapist, takes on a recently-returned Iraq War veteran, Derick Zeiger. She is able to treat his PTSD through massaging his back, which is covered with a chilling tattoo of a fatal mission in Iraq. She is able to alter his memories and transform his experience in Iraq so he no longer suffers having to recall the death of his friend, Mackey.

In “The Graveless Doll of Eric Mutis,” Larry and his three high school friends, who bullied a kid named Eric Mutis years before, are stunned to discover a doll-like scarecrow resembling Eric in the park. As time passes, pieces of the scarecrow begin to disappear, causing the boys to wonder what is going on. Larry believes that the scarecrow is somehow a physical transformation of Eric caused by himself and his friends for so mercilessly tormenting Eric for so long. Larry ends up deciding to keep watch over what remains of the scarecrow to protect it against whatever is mauling it.



"Vampires in the Lemon Grove"

Summary

"Vampires in the Lemon Grove" – In Sorrento, Italy, the first lemons are always harvested in October. Clyde and his wife, Magreb, work the Alberti family lemon farm, Santa Francesca's Lemon Grove, in Sorrento. By all appearances, Clyde is a kindly Italian grandfather. In truth, he is a vampire. A teen girl named Fila who works the farm produce stall knows about Clyde's condition, and always gives him the best lemons she can find. American, Welsh, and German tourists frequently visit the grove, but usually pass by Clyde. In the evenings, the tourists are always amazed to see the bats descend on the grove. Among them is Magreb, who still frequently transforms into a bat.

Clyde reflects on how he and his wife traveled the world to discover a food source that could quench their thirst in reform, and remembers happily how the Sorrento lemons were able to do just that. Clyde also reflects on how it was Magreb who helped him to learn that all of the folklore about vampire – such as needing to drink blood to survive and sleep in coffins to avoid dying in the sun – was just folklore. Indeed, as Clyde learned, drinking blood didn't actually slake his thirst, so he sought to reform by giving up blood with his wife.

As the time passes, Fila grows closer to Clyde, considering him to be something of a grandfather figure. Clyde, however, cannot help but remembering the years he fed on human blood when looking at her neck. Clyde also learns from Margeb that lemons are no longer fully satisfying her hunger. Clyde is experiencing the same problems, but denies that they must leave to find a new food source which will help them.

To get their mind off things, they go to see a vampire film called "Something Clandestine is Happening in the Corn!" but it does little to help. Magreb leaves early. After the movie, Clyde and Fila run into one another. As they walk home, Fila teases Clyde about being a vampire, urging him to feed on her and telling him he is still a danger. Clyde loses control and feeds on her, killing her. He leaves her body and flees for the lemon grove, realizing he is a monster again. He flees to the cliffs and caves where Magreb and the other vampires stay, hoping to find solace in her. He wonders what she will think of him, now.

Analysis

"Vampires in the Lemon Grove," told in the first-person perspective from Clyde's point of view, is steeped in horror, subtle at first but abundantly present later on. Horror is central to the story. The horror in "Vampires in the Lemon Grove" comes through the existence of vampires like Clyde, and through the idea that a vampire can never truly be trusted. Clyde claims to be a reformed vampire, but Fila proves to be too much for him to resist. In large part, this comes as a result of being unable to deny his true nature, but also



comes as a part of the classic horrific acts associated with vampires –the drinking of blood and the killing of the victim. This can be seen in Clyde suddenly turning on, and feeding on Fila, who becomes utterly helpless against him and his vampiric nature.

In “Vampires in the Lemon Grove,” the theme of nature is also of paramount importance. In the story, Clyde and Magreb, as “reformed” vampires, are seeking to deny their true nature under the suspicion that folklore, rumors, and settled assumptions about them are all false. They travel the world seeking alternative food sources – but their true nature cannot be denied forever. This is especially true of Clyde, who succumbs to his natural instincts and feeds on Fila. Likewise, Fila has been living in denial of Clyde's true nature, truly believing he is reformed and enjoying the danger of being close to a vampire without understanding that danger.

The past also plays an important role, here. In the past, Clyde was a typical vampire, sleeping in a coffin during the day and feasting on human blood by night. Having met Magreb, and having learned that much of what is known about vampire nature to be false, Clyde seeks to reform himself to atone for the past. It is horror and revulsion at his own past that compels Clyde to do better in the present, though this does not work out.

Discussion Question 1

Clyde claims to be a reformed vampire, and that what is believed to be his true nature is not really his true nature at all. Why does he believe this? Is he correct in his beliefs? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Although Fila knows that Clyde is a vampire, she still gets close to him - too close, as it turns out in the end. Why does she risk her safety to get close to Clyde?

Discussion Question 3

Why do Clyde and Magreb attempt to live as normally as they possibly can, even when it is against their nature as vampires? What is the end result? Why?

Vocabulary

meditation, widower, benevolent, vacantly, adulterated, effervescing, innocuous, anonymity



"Reeling for the Empire"

Summary

"Reeling for the Empire" – Kitsune Tajima, along with a host of other Japanese girls from all walks of life, are being transformed into half-human, half-silkworm creatures from whom the Machine will reel silken thread. Two new girls arrive at the Model Mill – 12-year-old Tooka and 19-year-old Etsuyo - sisters from Sakegawa in Yamagata Prefecture. Tooka is horrified by the white-furred half-girls that she sees in the mill. She has no idea what is going on, but she and her sister have already drunk the tea which will begin their changing. It is explained that the girls have been forcibly sold to the Agent of the Mill to pay off family debts in the middle of the industrialization of Japan. The silk produced by the girls pays that debt. The silk begins as liquid in the body, hardening by morning, and then needing to be extracted by the Machine. The girls are purchased by the Agent who has official approval from the Emperor. The girls, it is explained will be used to produce silk to respond to the tremendous European demand since the pebrine virus wiped out Europe's worms. The Agent, however, never tells the girl's family how the silk will be produced or what will become of the girls.

Kitsune and the other girls spend their whole lives in a single room, where they are fed, use the bathroom, sleep, and reel silk for the empire. They refer to the mill as "Nowhere Mill" since none of them have any idea where they are. Tooka and Etsuyo are terrified, but Kitsune tries to comfort them. This causes Kitsune to reflect on how she voluntarily sold herself to the Agent to alleviate her own family's farm debt following her grandfather's suicide and her father falling ill. Kitsune now wonders if she is ill herself, for she has been dizzy lately, and has been producing a ash-black thread instead of bright green. None of the other girls have the same problem. Kitsune plays her refusal to have any more thread reeled as a rebellion seeking pay based on Japan's own rebellious history. The other girls join in, but Dai fares the worst as she has the most thread build-up in her stomach. The other girls tell her it is no longer worth it, but Dai refuses and later dies.

Kitsune and the other girls return to reeling as normal. Kitsune's thread turns black, and she believes she is going to die. Kitsune converses with Chiyo, a girl whose own family had a small silkworm farm where the worms were prevented from turning into moths in order to keep them producing. Kitsune realizes her black thread has nothing to do with her death, but with her metamorphosis into a moth. She begins producing a tremendous amount of the black thread, and weaving it into the shape of a cocoon. She gets the other girls to join in as well. During the Agent's next visit, the girls surround him and wind him up in a cocoon to die. The girls then wind themselves up to transform into the next stage of their lives.



Analysis

"Reeling for the Empire," told in the first-person perspective of Kistune, is utterly reliant on horror. The theme of horror is readily found and comes in two forms. The first is classic in nature, in which Kitsune and her fellow girls are forcibly turned into half-human, half-silkworm creatures against their will. They resemble something monstrous, and something truly horrific in appearance – though in nature, they are still very much human. The second form of horror comes in the fact that these girls have been forced into the situation at all – that their fate has been determined by family debts, and that their fate is inescapable. Once sold, they are transformed into the half-human, half-silkworm creatures they become, and are unable to do anything to reverse the change. Through this, the theme of nature is also of paramount importance. The Agent and the Emperor seek to deny the true nature of the girls involuntarily by forcibly changing their physical being. They are no longer human girls, but worm-like creatures which terrify the new girls upon their arrival. However, the true nature of these transformed girls as thinking, feeling, and rational human beings cannot be denied, which results in the rebellion against the Agent.

The theme of the past also plays heavily into the plot of "Reeling for the Empire," especially where the themes of nature and horror come together. Japan's turbulent history of rebellions, wars, and even the personal history of the girls in the Mill create the conditions for the girls' own rebellion. With Japan seeking an export to capitalize on world markets and the global hunger for silk, Japan turns to silk - but only a specific kind of silk that can be spun by the creatures the Emperor has created. While the parents of these girls-turned-creatures may have been paid for them (essentially selling the girls into slavery), the girls themselves have not been paid; and while the girls may have had their freedom sold, they themselves will regain it and restore their true nature to themselves – as free beings, and as the moths they were destined to be. Who the girls become has everything to do with who the girls once were, and what is in their blood as Japanese.

Discussion Question 1

What seems to be more disturbing to Kitsune and the other girls – their transformation from humans to half-silkworm creatures, or their loss of their natural freedom? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Although the girls may no longer be human in appearance, are they still human mentally, emotionally, and morally? Why or why not?



Discussion Question 3

Why does it seem that the Emperor chooses to turn to half-human girls to spin silk rather than to rely on actual silkworms? Why do the girls themselves tolerate their situation for so long? What finally causes them to rebel?

Vocabulary

prefecture, imperial, vocation, filature, insufferable, ineradicable, superfluity, obviates



"The Seagull Army Descends on Strong Beach, 1979" – "Proving Up"

Summary

"The Seagull Army Descends on Strong Beach, 1979" – Fourteen-year-old Nal Wilson is on Strong Beach in Athertown on July 11, 1979 when massive flocks of seagulls descend on the place. It is the largest such gathering of gulls in history, which scientists cannot explain. Nal barely notices them at first, because he is thinking about how awful a summer it has been so far – from a bad haircut given to him by his cousin, Steve, to missing out on a pre-college summer program thanks his mom getting laid off, to having to work to bring in extra money for the family, to Nal's older brother, Samson, dating the gorgeous Vanessa Grigalunas, the girl Nal himself has long had a crush on. Nal listens to Samson and Vanessa having sex behind a nearby dune, and he becomes even more miserable. He goes dribbling his basketball along the boardwalk. That night, Nal has a nightmare about seagulls flooding into town and changing the future.

Nal begins to wonder if the birds might be an omen. At the library, he learns that most kinds of birds signal death or doom of some kind. As Nal travels through town, he discovers the seagulls have been scavenging and dropping all sorts of things – from eviction notices to cassettes to coins to pens, and so on. Nal collects everything he finds and brings it to the police. While Nal is hoping to be helpful in returning these goods, the police are dismissive and annoyed.

Nal goes to play basketball. Samson later approaches Nal for money to help him purchase a ring as a birthday gift for Vanessa. Samson says he can't help. When Samson goes to grab the ball, Nal suddenly slugs him in the gut. Samson then shoves Nal onto the ground. Nal is stunned, both excited and worried he has hurt Samson. Nal later goes and purchases the ring Samson had intended to buy and gives it to Vanessa instead. Vanessa is thrilled with the gift, and has sex with him. As they have sex, they notice Vanessa's cat is watching them. As Nal has sex with Vanessa, he thinks about the swirling of the gulls, imitating their motions and causing Vanessa to beg him not to stop.

"Proving Up" – Eleven-year-old Miles Zegner and his father, Pennsylvania natives, await the arrival by train of the one-eyed Inspector to Hox River Settlement, Nebraska. The Inspector is verifying those who have been granted 160 acres of land through the Homestead Act meet all necessary conditions – including a home with one glass window. Glass windows are the most difficult requirement for the settlers to meet. Miles's family arranges to share their window with their neighbors, the Stricksels. Miles is happy to help, hoping it will help him to "prove up" that he is a man, even though Miles isn't morally thrilled about what is being done. Yet, Miles knows the Hox River Window has been shared many times before. Both Miles's family and the Stricksels are currently in need of the window, knowing their time has come to "prove up" as a settler



family – meaning they must be verified under the Act so they can permanently own the land on which they now live. This is especially important to Miles's parents, as his three sisters are buried on the property. At first, Ma wants to go, but it is Miles who is ultimately given the responsibility to retrieve the window.

As Miles heads to the Stricksels's with a window, a snow storm sets in. Up ahead, a dark figure moves through the prairie grass. It terrifies Miles, who urges his horse on faster. As he rides, he thinks about how the window came from the Yotherses' old, abandoned homestead, which they had secured the legal right to own but which they had left for unknown reasons. Rumor has it the land is haunted. This worries Miles as he and his horse become lost on the land. He wonders if the storm is not God's punishment for having stopped to unwrap and look at the window when he was told not to. Miles and the window fall from the saddle while the horse takes off running. Miles thanks God that the window is unbroken, but falls asleep.

When he wakes up, the snow is melting and encounters a blackened man who is so dirty he appears to be made of dust. The man explains his wife and children are dead, and all he has is a torn piece of the Homestead Act. He explains he is in need of a window. Miles offers to loan the family window to the man. The man accepts, saying he was acquainted with the Yotherses, but only at the end. He contends that Miles's father is a thief. Miles suddenly has a bad feeling and seeks to take the window back. The man refuses, looking into Miles's eyes with empty eye sockets. A short time later, Mrs. Stricksel sees her children running out to meet Miles. Miles is riding a horse from the Florissants, and appears darker. Mrs. Strickland has the feeling she should now call her children back.

Analysis

The theme of horror returns strongly in "Proving Up," and subtly in "The Seagull Army Descends on Strong Beach, 1979," both told in the third-person narrative. In "Proving Up," rumors that the old Yothers homestead is haunted prove to be true. There is a collection of debts through death that reaches through the generations of homesteaders, as the reader notes that what is taken from one, one will take in different form from another. The settler who held the land before the Yotherses was clearly unable to make it on the land, so his land being taken by the Yotherses was something his soul could not stand. The reader will note the dead settler carries a torn piece of the Homestead Act in his hands – proof in his mind that his land was stolen from him, even if he was already dead. He believes he needs a window to complete his claim, so he takes the window from Miles – as well as Miles's soul. Miles goes on to take a horse from the Florissant family, and then heads toward the Stricksels – where what he will take next is unknown but can be guessed at (the souls of the Stricksels). The horror in "The Seagull Army Descends on Strong Beach, 1979" consists of a deviation from the norm, which is enough to be chilling in a mundane sense for the citizens of Athertown.

Indeed, this departure from the norm in "The Seagull Army Descends on Strong Beach, 1979," through a strange fluctuation in nature – both the natural world and what is



considered to be normal – proves to be horrific to those who are unused to such changes, and who suffer negatively from them. Nal is used to his older, more handsome brother always being stronger and dominating him in every aspect of life – including getting the girl that both brothers want. The seagulls in the area demonstrate to Nal that in the natural world, the fittest survive. True nature cannot be denied, but must be embraced. The seagulls begin stealing various items from people left and right as is their natural state of survival, with some things valuable and some no more than trash.

This registers deeply in Nal's mind. He goes on to preempt his brother by purchasing the ring for Vanessa first, giving it to her, sleeping with her, and winning out over his brother in the end – just as the strongest survive in the natural world. Just like the gulls, he has stolen a victory. His punching of his brother in the stomach is also a deviation from the norm for Samson, but very much a tapping into of the natural world for Nal. These acts of natural theft, the reader should note, are very much in contrast with the generousness and kindness of the settlers in Nebraska, who in life willingly give whatever they can to help their friends and neighbors – but when they believe they are wronged, they will do whatever is necessary to make things right (even from beyond the grave).

Theft thus becomes an important theme in both stories. Theft is seen as unnatural in “Proving Up,” for even on the frontier where things are desperate, people do their best to remain Christian and civilized toward one another. Note that true theft only occurs after death, once life itself has been stolen away from the individual. Death, as part of the natural order of things, also becomes essential thematically in “Proving Up,” for it is the undead who do untoward things. In “The Seagull Army Descends on Strong Beach, 1979,” theft is seen as part of the natural order among the gulls – a lesson which Nal applies to his own life in the stealing of Vanessa away from his brother. And in both stories, the past matters greatly to how things play out in the present. In “Proving Up,” the past – including everything from the deaths of Miles's sisters to the departure of the Yotherses to the dead settler's presence – greatly affect how Mile's own life ends up. His parents do not want to give up the land their family has literally died for, whereas in “The Seagull Army Descends on Strong Beach, 1979,” a bad past summer and a bad past living under the shadow of Samson compels Nal to finally assert himself.

Discussion Question 1

Why do the settler families in “Proving Up” go through such great lengths to share a window? How does this contrast with the affairs and activities of the dead? Why do you believe this is?

Discussion Question 2

How does theft in “The Seagull Army Descends on Strong Beach” affect the natural order of things in Athertown among its people – especially Nal? Why?



Discussion Question 3

In "Proving Up," theft is seen as unnatural, but to the dead, it is very natural. Why? Do you believe that generosity or theft is more natural to humankind? Why?

Vocabulary

migratory, akimbo, nadir, stoically, homunculus, dramatization, presentiment, lurid, voracity, galumphing, masticating, aperture



"The Barn at the End of Our Term" – "Dougbert Shackleton's Rules for Antarctic Tailgating"

Summary

"The Barn at the End of Our Term" – Each day, a girl feeds the horses in the Barn, including Rutherford Birchard Hayes, Nineteenth President of the United States of America, reincarnated as a horse. Rutherford reflects on how confused he was to return to life as a horse. Rutherford has been able to learn a number of things so far –that the Barn is probably located in Kentucky, that there are 22 stalls in the barn with most of the horses being former presidents, and that there seems to be no rhyme or reason as to why which presidents from when end up in the barn. Eisenhower believes they have been reborn into the past, for there are no B-52 bombers in the sky. The presidents also believe that the girl who tends to them is the niece of the owner of the farm, Mr. Fitzgibbons, who is a lazy man. The horses get along well enough, making friends with the other animals of the farm and surrounding land, and running for office among them. Rutherford believes he has found the reincarnated version of his wife in a sheep, though he cannot be sure.

One afternoon, James A. Garfield runs away, jumping over the fence to freedom. A new horse is led in. It is John Adams. John Adams cannot handle being trapped in the body of a horse. He wants to be freed. He and Rutherford check out the fence over which Garfield escaped. They have all tried and failed to jump before, and wonder how Garfield managed to succeed. Adams decides to bring together a mass escape plan, believing the country needs them and seeking to secure the help of as many other presidents as he can, regardless of political party. One afternoon, the presidents get hold of the girl's schoolbooks, hoping to find one about history to see how posterity has regarded their presidencies. There are no history books among them, which enrages Adams and causes him to wonder what is being taught in schools these days. A few nights later, Rutherford begins to wonder whether he is more human or more animal, and what may or may not wait on the other side of the fence. He realizes that he is truly alive at that moment and not in Heaven, and that with or without the fence, he and his fellows are already imprisoned. He charges the fence and clears it.

"Dougbert Shackleton's Rules for Antarctic Tailgating" – Each year, people head to Antarctica for the Food Chain Games where they support Team Whale or Team Krill. People have been known to die trying to reach the Games. People going down to see the whales feed must be well-prepared and well-stocked for the brutally cold weather. Dougbert Shackleton, the narrator, explains his many rules for tailgating in the Antarctic: from dressing appropriately to packing a victory cooler to never giving up, especially if one supports Team Krill. Dougbert also maintains that one should look as much like a krill as possible, especially when rooting for Team Krill. Dougbert contends that it takes



a special kind of fan to root for the underdog, and believes that one day, Team Krill will be triumphant against Team Whale.

Analysis

Nature proves to be a tremendously important theme between the stories “The Barn at the End of Our Term” and “Dougbert Shackleton’s Rules for Antarctic Tailgating.” For reasons unknown, twenty-some American presidents in “The Barn at the End of Our Term” have been reincarnated as horses on a Kentucky Farm at a point in time before human flight was possible. Told in the third-person perspective, the true nature of the presidents as human beings in “The Barn at the End of Our Term” has been supplanted by a new nature as horses, putting them far closer in touch with the natural world than before. The chief goal among the president-horses becomes escape from the farm, but as Rutherford Hayes comes to recognize, escaping from the farm will not allow them to escape from their new nature as horses. This is metaphorical of the fact that a president, no matter who he was before or after his presidency, even in death, will never escape his assumed nature as a president. He will forever be known as a president, for good or bad, no matter what the rest of his life was like. Jumping the fence to freedom only comes when Rutherford is able to accept his currently state of being.

Nature also proves to be of primal importance in “Dougbert Shackleton’s Rules for Antarctic Tailgating.” There, the first-person narrator, Dougbert, and his friends from around the world journey to Antarctica, considered one of the last real naturally wild place on Earth to watch the whales feed on krill. Dougbert always roots for the krill, even though they will never win against the whales. In the natural order of things, the krill will always lose out to the whales – though Dougbert holds out hope. The natural metaphors here are immense. Just as Dougbert hopes the krill may one day conquer the whales, he hopes that people may one day truly conquer the South Pole. Even in the present day, people die trying to traverse the continent. Herein the people become metaphorical for the krill, and Antarctica for the whales.

Death is important thematically and literally in both these stories. For the presidents to end up reincarnated as horses in “The Barn at the End of Our Term,” they must first die, leaving their human bodies behind. In “Dougbert Shackleton’s Rules for Antarctic Tailgating,” death comes by way of the krill killed by the whales, and those people who die while at the South Pole. In both stories, death is seen as a natural and necessary part of life – for the transition between bodies for the presidents, and for the sustaining of life in Antarctica.

Discussion Question 1

Why do Dougbert and so many other people from around the world travel to Antarctica to watch the Food Chain Games in “Dougbert Shackleton’s Rules for Antarctic Tailgating”? What metaphorical significance does this have for them? Why?



Discussion Question 2

Why do the presidents in “The Barn at the End of Our Term” believe escaping the farm will be in their best interests? How does Rutherford consider the situation? Why?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Dougbert compose a list of rules for Antarctic tailgating in “Dougbert Shackleton’s Rules for Atlantic Tailgating”? What importance do these rules have for Dougbert’s own experiences in the Antarctic?

Vocabulary

fastidious, incumbent, incognito, apolitical, odious, appellation, nonchalance, pemmican, katabatic winds, efficacy, masochist



"The New Veterans"

Summary

"The New Veterans" - Beverly, a massage therapist, meets with her new patient, the 6'2" 25-year-old Sergeant Derik Zeiger, veteran of the U.S. Army, who has a strange tattoo across his back which seems more like a cascade of blues, greens, and patches of browns than any actual picture. It is the first of ten free sessions for Zeiger, covered by military insurance under a new law. Zeiger explains he has had trouble sleeping due to pain in his lower back. Beverly, at age 44, wonders what it must be like to barter one's life for the future, such as by enlisting to serve a set amount of time. It causes Beverly to reflect on how, when she was 18, she had no plans for the future at all. Beverly reflects on how, after both her parents were diagnosed with cancer, she went to study massage therapy to earn extra income. She remembers how her father died in six months, but how her mother survived another decade.

As Beverly massages the man, she realizes his tattoo contains highly-detailed miniature scenes from Zeiger's service in Iraq. Zeiger credits it to a legendary artist outside Fort Hood. At first, the massage hurts Zeiger, but it begins to relax him eventually. As the sessions wrap up, Beverly is stunned to see the sun in the sky of the scene is moving around with her touch. Zeiger thanks her as he leaves. Beverly realizes it has been a long time since anyone has truly needed her, even though she works for Eduardo "Ed" Morales at Dedos Magicos, a massage and therapy spa.

At Zeiger's second session, he begins to tell Beverly about the artist, Applejack, who everyone called Cuz "just cuz (because)." He explains that his tattoo is only one-fifth of a giant picture which covers the backs of three other men as a memorial to their friend, Arlo Mackey, killed April 14, 2009, and paid for by Mackey's mother. The fourth back belongs to Mackey's little sister, a high school sophomore named Jilly. The moment of Mackey's death, in a fiery explosion by way of an IED, is illustrated on their backs as well. It was Mackey's mother who told them to put the past behind them. It is all about honoring the dead, Zeiger explains, so that the dead may still live and walk.

Zeiger explains he is still being treated for PTSD. As Beverly massages Zeiger, Zeiger falls asleep. She closes her eyes and can experience firsthand the very scene on Zeiger's back as if she was there. She realizes it is like a flashback, though she has never personally experienced what she is now remembering. It terrifies her, but over the next week, seems like a silly dream. When Zeiger comes back, he says it is his fault that Mackey died. He says that he could have stopped the convoy they were in when he saw a red detonation wire out on the road, but didn't want to stop the convoy because he didn't want to have to stop again for a piece of trash or something of the sort in such bad heat. Beverly insists it is not his fault, but Zeiger doesn't buy it. She then notices a strange scar that rises and falls on his back. She massages it, and it disappears. Zeiger then reports feeling great as he leaves. Beverly wonders if she has somehow saved Zeiger from his own tripwire, the tripwire being the scar. At his next appointment, he



looks like a new man, and recalls never having seen a tripwire. He explains the IED was detonated remotely. This causes Beverly to realize he is free of his guilt over Mackey's death.

As Beverly continues to work on Zeiger, his tattoo continues to change. She feels as if her hands are kneading sand, and that the tattooed sky seems to glow. Beverly begins to wonder if memories can be altered through physical touch, or if she is just crazy. As time passes, Zeiger gets a stable IT job and begins hanging out with friends. Zeiger relates a strange dream where he is alone, walking for miles and miles and unspooling a detonation wire, trying to find the triggerman but being unable to do so. Meanwhile, Beverly is continuing to have worse and worse flashbacks, including nightmares about Mackey's death. Zeiger misses three appointments in a row, saying he is feeling too good to come in. During this time, Beverly feels better. Zeiger relates that he spoke to Mrs. Mackey on the phone, who revealed that Jilly has been acting out in school, perhaps owing to the tattoo on her back. It has been suggested that the tattoo be removed. Zeiger explains he'll never get his own tattoo removed, however.

Beverly gets into an argument with her sister, Janet, on the phone. Janet doesn't want to hear about all the help that Beverly has given Zeiger, especially after Janet is annoyed that Beverly has for so long spoken about how much care she took of their dying mother. She realizes she must set Zeiger's memories straight. When she tries to get him to talk about Iraq again, he explodes in anger and leaves.

Word soon comes that Lance Corporal Oscar Ilana, a patient at Ed's, has committed suicide. Ed explains he wanted to save Oscar, but that some people are simply beyond help. Beverly tries to get in touch with Zeiger, but he does not respond. Finally, Zeiger calls in the middle of the night, asking for an immediate meeting, stating he is in pain. Beverly agrees. When Zeiger arrives, his entire back is bruised, bleeding, and discolored, looking worse than ever. Beverly decides to knead the memory of Mackey's death out of his mind completely. A month later, Beverly and her sister begin speaking again out of nowhere. Thinking back on Zeiger, she can only hope she truly helped him.

Analysis

Horror has immense thematic importance in "The New Veterans," told in the third-person narrative mode. Horror appears in this story in a non-traditional way. Typically thought of as monsters and the supernatural, horror in "The New Veterans" is instead of a very psychological, experiential, and real-world variety. This comes through Zeiger's experiences during the Iraq War, in which he believes he is responsible for the death of his good friend, Mackey. This is something that haunts him just like a ghost, for it was a traumatic and horrifying experience. Indeed, a nod to classic horror (specifically, Ray Bradbury's "The Illustrated Man" and Oscar Wilde's "The Picture of Dorian Gray") is found through the physical manifestation of Zeiger's psychological and emotional damage, and reflection of events that actually happened in the tattoo itself. This itself is horrifying to Beverly, who nevertheless seeks to help Zeiger by changing his memories.



Memories, she notes, are the one things that cannot be operated on – but Beverly finds herself able to do this. Through the tattoo, she is able to experience firsthand the things which Zeiger did – and to shape the very memory of the events themselves. The death of Mackey, which has taken such a devastating toll on Zeiger, is erased. In a way, Beverly has stolen Zeiger’s memories and replaced them with better memories, but she has also prevented Zeiger from going over a cliff the way that Oscar Ilana did. The reader should note the physical stripe scar on Zeiger’s back is likened to a tripwire – not to a literal bomb, but a psychological bomb that Beverly has managed to defuse, thus saving Zeiger from suicide and averting what could have been the natural order of things.

The natural order of things – which seems to have been the case with Ilana – has been the past. The past has been the summation of the present for both Zeiegr and Beverly entirely. Beverly’s own past – losing her years as a young adult caring for her mother – while Zeiger has lost much of his youth due to the horrors he has experienced and endured gives them a common ground. Beverly knows that, despite having lost her youth, she has a good life. She does not want to see Zeiger lose either the rest of his youth or even his life due to his past in Iraq. It is her own past, and Zeiger’s past, which compels Beverly to do away with his memories, the very elements of the past which people keep with them through their lives. The reader will recall how Mackey’s mother told Zeiger and his brothers-in-arms to put the past behind them. While they did this through memorializing it on their backs – behind them – Beverly has truly been able to help Zeiger put the past behind him rather than carrying it on his back like a burden.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Ilana's suicide so heartbreaking for Beverly and Ed? What does Ilana’s suicide especially mean for Beverly, given that she is tending to Zeiger?

Discussion Question 2

How does the past affect both Beverly and Zeiger? How was Beverly able to cope with her past? Why has Zeiger been unable to truly cope with his?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Beverly feel such a strong pull towards Zeiger? Why does she so desperately wish to help him by stealing away his bad memories?

Vocabulary

excruciatingly, pendulous, accustomed, infinitesimally, rudimentary, tentatively



The Graveless Doll of Eric Mutis

Summary

A scarecrow is found lashed to the tallest tree in Friendship Park, in the city of Anthem, New Jersey, far away from the country. Larry Rubio and his group of friends, including Gus, Juan Carlos, and Mondo, are the ones who discover the scarecrow lashed to the tree. The tree, an oak, overlooks a limestone ravine everyone calls “the Cone,” which has become nothing more than a large trash can. The tree is carved with graffiti, including some done by Larry and his friends, who call themselves Camp Dark. The scarecrow, upon closer inspection, is very lifelike and even has fingers. It is cold to the touch. Mondo recognizes the scarecrow as resembling Eric Mutis, a new kid they knew years ago who was nerdy, prone to seizures, and unpopular. Larry remembers how everyone made fun of him, calling him “Mutant,” and how Camp Dark in particular were especially vicious, beating up kids all the time – including Eric on a regular basis.

In the present, Larry and his friends wonder what threat the scarecrow could possibly be keeping away from the park. Only Gus doesn't oppose removing the scarecrow. Gus cuts it free and flings it into the Cone. Over the next week, nothing strange happens. Larry and his friends ask around to try to find out whatever became of Eric. They find out nothing of value, and begin to wonder who even made the scarecrow to begin with.

Larry and the others soon discover that the scarecrow has been mauled, with an arm removed. Everyone thinks Larry is responsible, but Larry says he is not. Over the next eight days, piece by piece of the scarecrow's body disappears. Larry denies he has anything to do with it, and feels sickened by it. He even wants to bury what remains of the scarecrow. Larry begins to wonder if they are all somehow responsible for creating the scarecrow. At the park, Larry and Mondo discover a new carving on the tree that says “Eric Mutis (heart shape) Saturday.”

Larry then relates that last spring, he had been riding his bike to see a kid who owed him money when he was clipped by Eric's family car. Eric then invited Larry over to his house, which was a dump, for a change of shirts since Eric's was bloodied. It was while he was at Eric's that Larry saw a massive rabbit being kept by Eric that Eric occasionally whispered to. Eric revealed the rabbit's name was originally Molly Mouse, that he changed it to Saturday, that the rabbit had gone missing, he had found the rabbit, and had never returned it to its owners. At home, Larry called the owners of the rabbit to report it was found, giving Eric's address. At school, Eric became quiet and sullen without the rabbit. In the present, Larry and Mondo head to the park where Larry goes into the ravine to protect what remains of the scarecrow against whatever comes for the rest of it.



Analysis

Horror returns to be the dominant theme in the final story in Karen Russell's collection. In "The Graveless Doll of Eric Mutis," told in the first-person perspective from the point of view of Larry, Larry and his friends have horrifically bullied Eric Mutis for years – only to discover that a doll-like scarecrow of Eric Mutis is now tied to a tree in the park for all to see. Apart from the horrific treatment of Eric by Larry and his friends, the scarecrow itself comes to horrify Larry and his friends, but Larry especially because it is so out of the ordinary, and brings the past face-to-face with Larry. Just as Beverly was able to physically alter memory and emotion in the previous story "The New Veterans," Larry comes to believe he is able to alter the physical nature of Eric through the cruelty perpetrated on Eric. Larry imagines that it is possible he and his friends have bullied the life out of Eric, culminating with Larry giving up Eric's possession of the runaway rabbit.

The past becomes incredibly important to Larry who recalls – now with regret – the way that he and his friends acted as bullies, especially toward Eric. The past haunts Larry deeply, though it doesn't bother his friends in the least. The scarecrow's presence torments Larry, especially when his friends throw the scarecrow into the ravine. Day by day, pieces of the scarecrow go missing or are mauled as though by a wild animal. The metaphor here is clear: Larry and his friends are the wild animals, clawing away at Eric piece by piece, driving him into a shell of his former self through their cruelty and bullying. Only at long last does Larry descend into the ravine to defend what is left of Eric's scarecrow in order to atone for the past and so that he may bury what remains. While it is unclear what has become of the actual Eric Mutis, it is clear he has died a metaphorical death, while his scarecrow has died a literal death.

Theft also becomes an important, though subtle theme here. In many ways, Eric's life was indeed stolen away from him – whether or not he is dead, and whether or not he has actually been transformed into a scarecrow – by Larry and his buddies for all of their cruelty towards Eric for so long.

Discussion Question 1

How does the past come back to haunt Larry? How does Larry feel about the past? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Larry come to believe that he and his friends are responsible for the scarecrow's existence? Why do his friends react so skeptically? Why is Larry undeterred?



Discussion Question 3

Why does Larry climb down into the ravine? What does he hope that this will do?

Vocabulary

sanguine, insurrection, juxtaposing, poverty, insomniac, scrutable



Characters

Clyde and Magreb

Clyde and Magreb factor into the story “Vampires in the Lemon Grove.” Clyde and Magreb are elderly, reformed vampires who have sworn off drinking human blood and living as vampires have traditionally done upon discovering that much of what is believed to be true about them is incorrect. They travel around the world, tapping into one food source after another in the attempt to slake their thirst and satisfy their hunger, ultimately coming to settle in a Lemon Grove in Sorrento, Italy. The lemons work for a time but do not last for long, as the pangs for something stronger grow in both Clyde and Magreb. Clyde, however, is unable to resist his true nature, and feeds on the young Fila, the only local who knows his secret.

Fila

Fila factors into the story “Vampires in the Lemon Grove.” Fila is a sweet and beautiful 17-year-old girl who works the produce stand at the lemon grove. She is the only local who is able to determine that Clyde is a vampire. She grows close to him, believing he is reformed and looking at him like a harmless, grandfatherly figure. She proves to be too strong a temptation to Clyde, however, and is killed when he finally snaps and feeds on her.

Kitsune

Kitsune factors into the story “Reeling for the Empire.” A girl from Japan in her early twenties, Kitsune is among those girls who works at the mill reeling thread having been transformed into a half-human, half-silkworm creature. Unlike the other girls, who have been sold by their families to pay off debts, Kitsune sold herself not realizing what she would be getting into. At long last, she has had enough, and leads a rebellion against the Agent for freedom. Thereafter, she and her fellow girls spin cocoons so that they may transform into moths and leave,

Nal

Nal factors into the story “The Seagull Army Descends on Long Beach, 1979.” Nal is a 14-year-old boy who has been having a miserable summer, from a bad haircut to his brother, Samson, landing the girl, Vaneesa, that Nal himself has long had a crush on. The arrival of a massive gathering of seagulls awakens the natural state of order in Nal, in which he knows the strongest will survive. He then preempts his brother’s plans to buy Vanessa a ring for her birthday by doing it himself, and then having sex with her.



Miles

Miles Zegner factors into the story "Proving Up." Miles is an 11-year-old boy who has settled on the Nebraska frontier with his family after signing onto the Homestead Act. Miles is sent on an errand to deliver the area's lone window to the Stricksels so that both families may pass inspection and keep their land. On the way, Miles is stuck in a snowstorm and thereafter meets a dead settler from years before who steals the window from Miles. Miles's soul is then stolen, leaving Miles to be a roaming, walking corpse-like shell of his former self.

Rutherford B. Hayes

Rutherford B. Hayes factors into the story "The Barn at the End of Our Term," in horse form. Hayes is the Nineteenth President of the United States of America, and is reborn as a horse on a farm in Kentucky. Rutherford and his fellow presidents are perplexed at their current state of being, and believe escaping the farm will help them to figure things out. Rutherford later realizes that escaping the farm will do nothing to help them escape their horse bodies, but Rutherford still manages to jump the fence to freedom.

Dougbert Shackleton

Dougbert Shackleton factors into the story "Dougbert Shackleton's Rules for Antarctic Tailgating." Dougbert travels to the Antarctic every year with family and friends from around the world to watch the whales feed on krill in an event they refer to as the Food Chain Games. Dougbert always roots for the krill in the hopes that the krill may one day win out against the whales just as Dougbert hopes man will one day truly conquer Antarctica. Accordingly, he composes a list of rules and suggestions for visitors to the Food Chain Games in Antarctica, which form the basis for the story.

Beverly and Zeiger

Beverly and Derik Zeiger factor into the story "The New Veterans." Beverly is a massage therapist in her mid-forties while Derik Zeiger is a U.S. Army veteran of the Iraq War in his mid-twenties. Zeiger is plagued by his experiences and the death of his friend, Mackey, and has a tattoo drawn onto his back which depicts the day of Mackey's death. Beverly, who gave up much of her own youth to care for her dying mother, does not want to see Zeiger fall apart or commit suicide, so she endeavors to erase his memories through her massaging of his back and the manipulation of his tattoo.

Larry

Larry factors into the story "The Graveless Doll of Eric Mutis." Larry is a local kid in Anthem, New Jersey who has a group of friends including Mondo, Juan Carlos, and



Gus, who call themselves “Camp Dark.” When they were younger kids, they were effective as a gang of bullies, most particularly targeting Eric Mutis. Now, as kids in their late teens, they discover a scarecrow in the park which resembles Eric and which causes Larry great guilt about the past. Larry’s friends throw the scarecrow into the ravine, but Larry climbs down into the ravine to protect the scarecrow against damage from wild animals as a matter of redemption.

Eric Mutis

Eric Mutis factors into the story “The Graveless Doll of Eric Mutis.” Eric is the new kid in Anthem some years before, where for his strange ways and nerdy nature, he is mercilessly made fun of, mocked, and bullied by everyone in school. Eric has little self-confidence as a result. Eric, as a teenager, finds a lost rabbit but rather than returning the rabbit, keeps the rabbit for himself. Larry learns about this, and calls the owners of the rabbit. This is the last time that Larry or anyone sees Eric Mutis until either Eric, or a representation of Eric, appears as a doll-like scarecrow in the park.



Symbols and Symbolism

Lemons

Clyde had hoped the lemons would be the key to his salvation as a vampire, but this does not turn out to be the case when temptation in the form of Fila proves to be too much. Lemons are grown on groves and farms in Sorrento, Italy, where Clyde and his wife now live as reformed vampires. Lemons are one of the few foods that can truly help Clyde and Magreb's hunger as vampires –but even the lemons do not last forever as their old hunger pangs for blood come back.

Blood

Blood symbolizes the undeniable, true nature of vampires. Blood, it is noted in "Vampires in the Lemon Grove," is not necessary for vampires to survive even though their appetite for it will always remain. Clyde and Magreb do their best to live on various foods, including lemons instead, but this does not last forever. Eventually, Clyde's true nature eventually gets the better of him, and he feeds on the blood of young Fila, killing her in the process.

Silk

Silk factors into the story "Reeling for the Empire," and represents the method by which the nature of Kitsune and the other girls is denied. Silk is normally spun by silkworms, and is the single major export of Japan during its period of industrialization. However, the silk reeled by the Mill in the story is silk gained from half-human, half-silkworm creatures created by a strange tea administered by the Mill's Agent. The silk is ultimately used to spin cocoons by Kitsune and the other girls so that they may transform into moths and fly away to freedom.

Seagulls

Seagulls factor into the story "The Seagull Army Descends on Long Beach, 1979," and symbolize not only nature of the natural world, but the disruption of order among the human population. Great flocks of seagulls descend on the town of Athertown on the shore in numbers never recorded anywhere in written history. The seagulls awaken the natural urges and inclinations for survival and dominance in Nal, where they come to represent the true nature of life in struggle and survival of the fittest. Nal mimics the thievery of the seagulls in his stealing of Vanessa, and mimics their swirling motions while he has sex with Vanessa.



Ring

The ring in “The Seagull Army Descends on Long Beach, 1979” represents a physical manifestation of the subversion of the existing order of things between Nal and his brother. The ring, with floral work around the band, is intended to be given as a gift to Vanessa by Samson. When Nal finds out about this, he preempts Sampson by buying the ring to give to Vanessa first. This wins Nal a night of sex with Vanessa.

Window

The window in “Proving Up” symbolizes truth and the undeniable nature of human beings. The glass window, taken by Miles’s father from the haunted land of the abandoned Yothers homestead, is shared among the families in the area when their dates of inspection arrive. The window is given to Miles to bring to the Stricksels’ place, but on the way, Miles is accosted and overtaken by the dark soul of a former settler seeking revenge for his land being taken by the Yotherses. The window here becomes symbolic of a window to truth, to the darker side commensurate with death among the otherwise Christian and charitable settlers.

The fence

The fence in “The Barn at the End of Our Term” is representative of the lack of acceptance being found among the horse-presidents. The fence surrounds the pastures where the horses graze, and becomes the chief obstacle to escape. Only James Garfield has ever been able to leap the fence. Rutherford B. Hayes eventually comes to accept that just because the farm may be escaped, doesn’t mean his new identity as a horse can be escaped. Upon accepting this, he is successfully able to leap the fence.

Krill and whales

Krill and whales in “Dougbert Shackleton’s Rules for Antarctic” symbolize the undeniable nature and order of the world. Each year, Dougbert and his friends venture to the Antarctic to see the whales feed on the krill. They take sides, rooting for either the whales or the krill. The whales become representative of Antarctica, while the krill become representative of the people who venture to the South Pole. Just as Dougbert hopes that the krill may one day win against the whale, so too does Dougbert hope the people who travel to Antarctica will truly conquer the place one day.

Tattoo

The tattoo in “The New Veterans” is symbolic of both the past and human nature. Crafted onto Zeiger’s back by a man named “Cuz” just outside of Fort Hood, the tattoo depicts the day of Mackey’s death in Iraq. The tattoo symbolizes the physical burden that



Zeiger carries, and warps and grows worse as a physical manifestation of his guilt over believing he is responsible for Mackey's death. By working on, and altering the tattoo supernaturally through massage, Beverly is able to manipulate and alter Zeiger's memories of that day, thus changing the natural order of bad memories having a negative impact on Zeiger in the present.

Scarecrow

The scarecrow in "The Graveless Doll of Eric Mutis" symbolizes regret and remorse. The scarecrow is a doll-like figure that is found lashed to a tree in Anthem, New Jersey's Friendship Park. The scarecrow resembles Eric Mutis, the kid that Larry and his friends bullied years before. Larry worries that they are somehow responsible for the Eric scarecrow, socking all the life out of him through their cruelty and turning him into a shell of his former self. As a result, Larry decides to protect the scarecrow through the night against wild animals and to give it a proper burial as a question of respect and redemption.



Settings

Sorrento

Sorrento is an old town in Italy where Clyde and Magreb have come to live in a lemon grove. The old-world town is reflective of the old world nature of Clyde and Magreb as vampires, and becomes a safe haven for them as they realize they can subsist on lemons. Sorrento is also the home of Fila and the lemon grove workers. It is in Sorrento, proper, that Clyde and Magreb go to see a movie which Magreb leaves early. On his way home, Clyde encounters Fila in Sorrento, during which times his true nature comes out when he feeds on, and kills Fila.

The Nineteenth Century

The Nineteenth Century is the era setting in which the stories "Reeling for the Empire," "Proving Up," and "The Barn at the End of Our Term" take place. "Reeling for the Empire" is set in late-1800s Japan during a period of rapid industrialization in which European demand for Japanese silk is inexhaustible. "Proving Up" takes place on the American frontier in Nebraska in what appears to be the 1870s or 1880s, during the fastest extent of immigration West. In "The Barn at the End of Our Term," the presidents reincarnated as horses come to believe they exist on a farm in the very late 1800s, as there are yet no planes of any kind in the sky.

Strong Beach

Strong Beach is located in the town of Athertown in an unidentified state in America. Strong Beach (and later, Athertown), becomes the site of the largest recorded gathering of seagulls in written history. The seagulls prove to be a nuisance to the people of the beach and the town, stealing both valuable items and junk items. The normal order and peace is upset in Athertown by the gulls, including how Nal overtakes his brother as the dominant sibling when he steals his brother's girlfriend. "Strong" Beach is itself symbolic and reflective of the natural idea of survival of the fittest (strongest) which Nal pursues from the example of the seagulls.

Antarctica

Antarctica is the cold, frigid, southernmost continent which serves as the main setting for "Dougbert Shackleton's Rules for Antarctic Tailgating." Each year, Dougbert, members of his family, and people and friends from around the world descend on Antarctica to watch the whales feed on krill in what they call the Food Chain Games. Visitors root for either the whales or the krill while observing the rules and suggestions Dougbert has laid out for those who wish not only to survive Antarctica, but to enjoy it.

The Cone

The Cone is a natural limestone ravine in Friendship Park in Anthem, New Jersey. It is overlooked by a massive old oak tree carved up by graffiti, and is a popular place for kids to throw their trash in. The Cone is visited by Larry and his friends in the story "The Graveless Doll of Eric Mutis" where they discover a scarecrow resembling Eric tied to the tree. The scarecrow is thrown into the Cone where, each day, animals maul or tear away parts of it. Larry, seeking to redeem himself for bullying Eric in the past, descends into the Cone to protect what remains of the scarecrow so that he can properly bury it.



Themes and Motifs

Horror is a way to speak to the true nature of individuals and the world at large.

Karen Russell uses horror in her collection as a way to speak to the true nature of individuals and the world at large. Horror is presented in various ways to this effect, subtly and overt, classically and dramatically, with the intent being not only to scare, frighten, or unnerve the reader, but to make important arguments about true nature. Horror appears in every story in the collection in some way, shape, or form.

In “Vampires in the Lemon Grove”, horror appears in a very classic way through the existence of vampires. Clyde and his wife, both vampires, deny their true nature as vampires by refusing to drink blood. Clyde’s true nature wins out in his horrific killing of Fila to drink her blood late in the story.

In “Reeling for the Empire,” horror assumes yet another classic form in the way that Kitsune and her fellow girls are transformed into half-silkworm creatures, altering but not completely changing their true nature. Though their appearance is monstrous, in keeping with classic horror, their nature does not match their physical appearance. Their true nature as caring and compassionate human beings desirous of freedom ultimately wins out as they rebel and escape from their captivity.

In “The Seagull Army Descends on Strong Beach, 1979,” the horror felt is less monstrous, more subtle, and more psychological. Samson is horrified at the prospect that his younger brother has managed to outdo him in both sports and love, and is horrified that he is no longer the dominant brother. Here, the true nature of the brothers is subverted by the unusual appearance of the seagulls, the horror coming in the undoing of established nature by an unusual though natural event.

In “Proving Up,” the horror employed is of a very classical, very overt kind through the presence of haunted land and the encounter Miles has with the dead settler. Settlers, deeply Christian and realizing they have only one another to rely upon in order to sustain life, deny their true nature as greedy and intent on self-preservation. In death, Miles and the other dead settlers take that which was denied them in life, not caring about anyone else and exemplifying their true nature.

In “The Barn at the End of Our Term,” horror again is subtle in the confusion and terror that some of the presidents face in discovering they have been reincarnated as horses. Though the presidents are horses, their natural human impulses regarding freedom and politics remain unchanged and result in some of the horses seeking to escape the farm.

In “Dougbert Shackleton’s Rules for Antarctic Tailgating,” horror is minimal but of a psychological nature in that it is horrific to comprehend that even in the present day and



age, people still die while visiting and traversing Antarctica despite modern technology and man's hardiness. Man has still been unable to subdue nature in the Antarctic.

In "The New Veterans," Zeiger carries around the horrors he experienced in war as terrifying memories with him, which weight down his mind, his heart, and his soul. The horror of war propels him toward a suicide which Beverly stops by changing Zeiger's memories, subverting the natural tendency to remember, and subverting the natural tendency for memories, thoughts, and feelings to affect one in the present.

In "The Graveless Doll of Eric Mutis," horror comes by way of the presence of the scarecrow version of Eric Mutis, and whatever creature is eating away at the scarecrow. Larry comes to see the destruction of the scarecrow as a metaphor for his bullying or Eric in the past, which in turn chills him to the bone and compels him to protect what remains of the scarecrow for burying, awakening in him a natural human penchant for remorse and kindness.

Nature is undeniable.

Karen Russell uses her collection to demonstrate the idea that nature is undeniable. Nature –in terms of the wild, the normal behaviors of men and animals, and in terms of the ways and patterns of the natural world itself –factor heavily into each of the stories in this collection, and cannot be denied (except through supernatural means). In some stories, the appearance of nature is subtle; in other stories, the importance of nature is clear and central to the plot.

In "Vampires in the Lemon Grove", Clyde and his wife, Magreb, are vampires who insist they are reformed. They no longer drink human blood and do all they can to live as normally like human beings as possible, denying their true nature as vampires. Fila accepts this reform, and grows close to Clyde, looking at him as more like a grandfather than a vampire. Ultimately, Clyde's true nature wins out when he snaps and drinks the blood of Fila to the point that he ends up inadvertently killing her. No matter how hard Clyde has tried to resist his true nature by reason and practice, his instincts are undeniable. In "Reeling for the Empire", the Agent has transformed the physical nature of Kitsune and the other girls from human beings to half silk-worm creatures. Despite their change in physical appearance, their human nature –including kindness and the desire for freedom –shines through in how the new girls are taken care of and the Agent is overcome in their quest for freedom. Their natural impulse for freedom cannot be denied.

In "The Seagull Army Descends on Strong Beach, 1979", the arrival of record numbers of seagulls throws the normal life of the residents of Athertown into disarray. The normal order of things –such as Samson being the more popular brother between himself and Nal –is reversed. Nal, drawing on the natural examples of survival of the fittest and thievery among the seagulls, steals his brother's girlfriend. He follows the example of the seagulls, embracing the natural world's way of doing things to win out with Vanessa. The natural impulse of seeking to dominate, to win, and to lead, cannot be denied to



Nal. In “Proving Up”, the Nebraska settlers share everything they have with one another in the hopes that they will all survive and flourish under the Homestead Act. In life, they are Christian, charitable, and kind –a conscious effort to alter natural impulses for self-survival. These natural qualities of selfishness come out in death, as Miles learns from the dead settler who seeks that which was denied to him in life.

In “The Barn at the End of Our Terms”, presidents reincarnated as horses come to realize that their undeniable, true, new nature is that of horses rather than souls in Heaven or people once more. Even as horses, however, their nature as human beings desirous of freedom cannot be denied, and is noted in their attempts to escape. Rutherford himself understands this contextually as knowing that no matter who he may have been before or after the presidency, he will forever be known only as a president. In “The New Veterans”, Beverly attempts to subvert and undue real nature by supernaturally manipulating and altering Zeiger’s naturally-occurring memories, with memories supposedly being the one unalterable, inoperable facet of human nature. Only through supernatural means can true nature be denied here. In “The Graveless Doll of Eric Mutis”, Larry comes to regret exploiting the human tendency toward cruelty against Eric Mutis many years before. He seeks redemption as a better nature through defending the Eric scarecrow against predators so that he may properly bury it.

Death is an instrumental and crucial component of horror and nature.

Death is an instrumental and crucial component of horror and nature in Karen Russel's collection “Vampires in the Lemon Grove” by Karen Russell. Death appears in almost every story in the collection. Death almost always appears negatively and horrifically in the stories and proves vital to the plots where it does appear.

In “Vampires in the Lemon Grove,” Clyde is seeking to make up for his past life as a vampire where he killed countless people drinking their blood. He is attempting to live life as a reformed vampire, but ends up snapping and inadvertently killing Fila when he drinks her blood. Her death is horrific and a tragedy because she trusted that Clyde had been reformed. Death is inseparable from both the horror of the situation, and the breaking through of Clyde's true nature.

In “Reeling for the Empire,” the Agent is literally killed while Kitsune and the other girls go through figurative deaths –from their former lives as human girls into half-silkworm creatures, and from their lives as half-silkworm creatures trapped in the Mill to moths that will have the freedom to fly away. Their true natures cannot be denied, and they are willing to kill to ensure they are free.

In “Proving Up”, among the reasons Miles and his family are so desperate to be awarded the land they have signed up for under the Homestead Act is that three members of their family have lived, died, and been buried on the land. It is only natural that the family should feel a rootedness to the land on which their family members have lived and died. Miles later encounters a dead settler who is seeking revenge against



subsequent settlers who have taken his land – and he takes Miles’s life in the process. Miles then goes on out across the prairie to presumably take other lives in turn - a horrifying prospect, and a revelation of the idea that human beings are naturally greedy.

In “The Barn at the End of Our Term,” the presidents who have been reincarnated as horses have already died as human beings. They are attempting to figure out how they ended up as horses rather than going to Heaven or being reborn as other people, and they wonder what will await them when they die again. Death has revealed their true nature as human beings concerned with things like freedom and justice, a nature which cannot be denied no matter the physical form they have taken.

In “Dougbert Shackleton’s Rules for Antarctic Tailgating,” Dougbert notes that to this day, people will die while visiting the Antarctic. Dougbert himself travels down to the Antarctic each year to witness a spectacle of death as the whales surface to feed on the krill. The krill cannot prevail against the whales in nature, just as human beings can never truly prevail against the Antarctic.

In “The New Veterans,” Zeiger is reeling from the death of his comrade, Mackey, while Beverly reflects sadly on the death of her own parents a few decades before. Beverly saves Zeiger’s life, preventing him from committing suicide by altering his memories of the day Mackey was killed. The tattoo on Zeiger’s back goes from being a morbid reminder of that day to a way for Beverly to manipulate his memories.

In “The Graveless Doll of Eric Mutis”, the past haunts Larry deeply, and comes back to haunt him through the Eric Mutis scarecrow. The scarecrow’s presence torments Larry, especially when day by day, pieces of the scarecrow go missing or are mauled as though by a wild animal. Larry and his friends are the metaphorical wild animals, clawing away at Eric piece by piece, driving him into a shell of his former self through their cruelty and bullying. Feeling guilty and seeking redemption, Larry descends into the ravine to defend what is left of Eric’s scarecrow in order so that he may bury what remains. While it is unclear what has actually become of the living Eric Mutis, it is clear he has died a metaphorical death, while his scarecrow has died a literal death.

The past as an important determinant of the present.

The past is an important determinant in the present in the short story collection “Vampires in the Lemon Grove” by Karen Russell. The past, thematically, includes a person’s history and life experiences that affect the individual in the present. The past influences each of the stories and their characters in the collection in different ways.

In “Vampires in the Lemon Grove,” Clyde and Magreb are running from their pasts as vampires. Clyde is seeking to redeem himself for his past where he drank human blood and killed his victims. He no longer wishes to be who he was in the past, and does everything he can to deny the past, but he cannot deny his true vampiric nature.

In “Reeling for the Empire,” Kitsune and the fellow girls have all been brought to the Mill in exchange for the paying off of their respective families’ debts, debts accumulated in



the past over many years in Japan. The girls also rely on Japan's history of rebellions for freedom to stage their own rebellion against the Agent.

In "The Seagull Army Descends on Strong Beach, 1979", Nal seeks to make up for the recent past, in the horrible summer he has so far had. He does this by outdoing his brother in stealing Vanessa away from him, and writing his own future.

In "Proving Up," the recent past matters greatly to Miles and the settlers, all of whom have left their old lives back East for new opportunities out West. The past also weighs heavily on Miles's family as Miles's three sisters have all died and been buried on their land out West. The past, by way of the dead settler, also comes back to haunt Miles even though Miles had nothing to do with the settler's life and death. The settler feels he has been wronged in the past, and so he takes it out on Miles. The past literally comes back to haunt the living - and to do them in.

In "The Barn at the End of Our Term," the presidents-reincarnated-as-horses come to learn that, just as they cannot escape their new incarnations as horses, they cannot escape their pasts as presidents. They will always be remembered as presidents first and foremost.

In "Dougbert Shackleton's Rules for Antarctic Tailgating," Dougbert reflects on how the whales – and Antarctica, by extension – have always triumphed over the krill (and the people who have ventured onto the continent).

In "The New Veterans," Beverly and Zeiger are both haunted by their respective pasts – Beverly by the deaths of her parents, and Zeiger by his war experiences and the death of Mackey. The past weights down heavily on Zeiger's heart and soul, while Beverly's past and worry about Zeiger's future compel her to save Zeiger in the present by altering his memories of the past. Only through the supernatural manipulation of the past can Beverly do anything to save Zeiger in the present.

In "The Graveless Doll of Eric Mutis," Larry comes to feel horribly about the past. This includes his merciless bullying and cruel behavior toward Eric Mutis. Hoping to atone for the past in the present, Eric guards the scarecrow version of Eric so that he may properly bury it – and the past.

Theft as an underlying aspect and determinant of nature and horror.

Theft is an important, underlying aspect and determinant of nature and horror in the short story collection "Vampires in the Lemon Grove" by Karen Russell. Theft involves the stealing of something or someone by another. Theft is a subtle theme that appears throughout some of the stories, but has tremendous importance where it does appear.

In "Vampires in the Lemon Grove," by denying his true nature as a vampire, Clyde ends up literally stealing the life of Fila when he finally snaps and feeds on her.



In "Reeling for an Empire," the girls who work at the Mill have their freedoms stolen by their parents who sell them, and then have their lives as they were stolen by being transformed into hideous half-silkworm creatures meant to spin silk. Kitsune and the other girls ultimately rebel and take back their freedom by beginning the process of transforming into moths.

In "The Seagull Army Descends on Strong Beach, 1979," record numbers of seagulls descend on Strong Beach in Athertown, where they create a public nuisance by stealing whatever they can find, from valuable objects to old junk. Their thievery becomes a model of the natural state of birds and animals for Nal, who comes to see himself as kin to the gulls. Nal goes on to steal his brother's girlfriend by preempting his birthday gift of a ring by purchasing the same ring for Vanessa first.

In "Proving Up," the theft of a window horrifically causes the dead to return to steal from the living, and to perpetuate a cycle of theft, horror, and death.

In "The New Veterans," Beverly is deeply saddened by the guilt and bad memories that Zeiger carries around. She manipulates his tattoo and manages to steal away the bad memories so that Zeiger does not recall them, and prevents him from committing suicide as a result.

In "The Graveless Doll of Eric Mutis," Larry believes he has effectively stolen Eric's life and happiness through the cruel bullying he and his friends carried on against Eric when they were younger. Larry believes this stealing of life and happiness has somehow manifested itself in the lifeless shell that is the doll-like scarecrow he and his friends find in the park. As a result, Larry protects the scarecrow until it can be buried as a measure of respect and redemption for stealing so much of Eric's childhood away. The natural human inclination toward cruelty is subdued for respect and remorse.



Styles

Point of View

Karen Russell tells the stories in her collection “Vampires in the Lemon Grove” in both the first and third-person point of view, with both forms being told with limited-omniscience. The stories “Vampires in the Lemon Grove,” “Reeling for the Empire,” “Dougbert Shackleton’s Rules for Antarctic Tailgating,” and “The Graveless Doll of Eric Mutis” are all told in the first-person perspective, while the stories “The Seagull Army Descends on Strong Beach, 1979,” “The Barn at the End of Our Term,” and “The New Veterans,” are told in the third-person point of view. Only the story “Proving Up” is told in both narrative modes: in the first-person point of view from the perspective of Miles for the majority of the story, with a brief section at the end of the story being told from the point of view of a third-person narrator after Miles has met his fate with the dead settler since Miles is unable to continue telling his own story. Each of these stories, regardless as to the narrative mode, retains an aspect of limited omniscience not only to evoke a sense of realism, but suspense, terror, and uncertainty as readers never know for sure what is coming next. This is especially in keeping with the common theme of horror found throughout all of the stories.

Language and Meaning

Karen Russell tells the stories in her collection “Vampires in the Lemon Grove” in language that is simple and straightforward. This is done for at least three reasons. First, Russell has composed and published her stories in the 2010s, a period of casual, simple language that is reflected in her writing. Second, the simple and straightforward language allows her to make her themes, points, her messages clear. This ranges from her arguments about human nature and themes like horror that are found in stories like “Vampires in the Lemon Grove” and “Proving Up.” Third, the simple and straightforward language allows her to clearly and quickly establish the actual presence of elements like horror in her stories, such as when the dead settler is first encountered in “Proving Up”, in which he is described as dark and dusty; or such as when the disappearance of the scarecrow in “The Graveless Doll of Eric Mutis” is described as occurring limb by limb, and piece by piece.

Structure

Karen Russell’s “Vampires in the Lemon Grove” is a collection of eight short stories that all share a few or more common themes, including horror, the past, nature, death, and theft. The stories include “Vampires in the Lemon Grove,” “Reeling for the Empire,” “The Seagull Army Descends on Strong Beach, 1979,” “Proving Up,” “The Barn at the End of Our Term,” “Dougbert Shackleton’s Rules for Antarctic Tailgating,” “The New Veterans,” and “The Graveless Doll of Eric Mutis,” “Dougbert Shackleton’s Rules for Antarctic



"Tailgating" comes in as the shortest story of the volume at 12 pages in length, while "The New Veterans" comes in as the volume's longest at 56 pages. The stories are arranged so that, while the stories may contain different themes, they share at least one major theme. For example, "Vampires in the Lemon Grove" and "Reeling for the Empire" both share strong themes of horror back-to-back, while "Reeling for the Empire" and "The Seagull Army Descends on Strong Beach, 1979" both contain strong themes of nature. This allows for greater flow through the book as themes create a shared atmosphere, and allow the reader to transition more easily from one story to the next.



Quotes

Most people mistake me for a small, kindly Italian grandfather, a nonno... They never guess that I am a vampire.

-- Clyde (Vampires in the Lemon Grove paragraph 2)

Importance: Clyde and his wife are lemon farmers in Sorrento, Italy, where they harvest their crops each October. Clyde explains clearly and succinctly to the reader that, by all appearances, he is a kindly old Italian grandfather. In reality, Clyde is a vampire who has spent much of his life seeking a truly satisfying food source, and finding it in lemons.

If we didn't have to drink the blood, then what on earth were these fangs for?

-- Clyde (Vampires in the Lemon Grove paragraph 45)

Importance: When Clyde meets and married Magreb, he comes to learn many interesting things from her. Among these things is that all of the folklore about vampire – such as needing to drink blood and sleep in coffins to avoid dying in the sun – is just folklore. This leads to Clyde and his wife traveling the world to find a truly satisfying food source, and finding it ultimately in lemons. Their determination to avoid blood and eat human food is reflective of their desire to live as human beings, and to tap into normality.

I will put it bluntly: we are all becoming reelers. Some hybrid creature, part kaiko, silkworm caterpillar and part human-female.

-- Kitsune (Reeling for the Empire paragraph 6)

Importance: Kitsune explains that she and various other girls have been taken to a place they call Nowhere Mill, where they transform into half-human, half-silkworm creatures. There, they are kept imprisoned and forced to spin web on behalf of the Agent who works for the Emperor. The girls, excepting Kitsune, have all been sold by their families to the mill to pay off debts, while Kitsune has sold herself. Their lives are to be spent doing this.

Who are you? What's happened to you? What is this place?

-- Tooka (Reeling for the Empire paragraph 7)

Importance: Tooka, a 12-year-old girl, and her 19-year-old sister, Etsuyo, are the latest additions to the mill. Tooka is especially horrified by the half-girl, half-silkworm creatures she sees, and understandably so. She has no idea what she has been taken into, for her family was told the girls would merely be working in a factory in the European and American style, not a transformational way.

The gulls landed in Athertown on July 11, 1979.

-- Narrator (The Seagull Army Descends on Strong Beach, 1979 paragraph 1)



Importance: The largest gathering of seagulls in recorded history occurs in Athertown in 1979. There, the strange variance in nature comes to reflect the variance in the life of people living there by way of deviations from the norm. Nal, less attractive and less popular than his brother, sees how the natural world operates: the fittest survive, and the fittest are those willing to take and dominate. Nal steals his brother's girlfriend as a result, and punches his brother in the stomach, thus supplanting the normal order of things with a new natural order.

That summer Nal was fourteen and looking for excuses to have extreme feelings about himself.

-- Narrator (The Seagull Army Descends on Strong Beach, 1979 paragraph 4)

Importance: Nal is at an important point in his life, as he is transitioning from being a boy to being a man. As such, he is vulnerable and looking for something more than what he is. What he is, he thinks, is a loser who is in the lower order. But the appearance of the seagulls awakens a new natural order, the natural state of war in him in which he challenges his bigger, stronger, more handsome brother for the same girl.

I go or we forfeit our chance. Pete can't go, we can't spare Miles –who does that leave? I go or we forfeit our chance. We don't prove up. We don't own the land where our girls are buried.

-- Ma (Proving Up paragraph 63)

Importance: When rumors fly that the Inspector may be on his way to verify that homesteaders meet the requirements of the Homestead Act, it is clear that the Zegers must share their window with their neighbors, the Stricksels. Here, Ma and Pa discuss meeting the requirements so the land they have lived on for the past five years will truly, legally become theirs. This is especially important to Ma since her daughters lived, died, and were buried on the land.

Proving up means you stand your ground, you win your title – hundred and sixty acres go from public to private. Clear and free, you hold it. Nobody can ever run you off. It's home.

-- Pa (Proving Up paragraph 89)

Importance: Here, Pa explains the importance of proving up for the Homestead Act. It is a test of endurance, of test of American rugged independence, and a test of survival. The reward is the best possible thing – land to call one's own, and to live on on one's own. It is a physical, important reward for the sacrifice and hardships endured by those who have staked a claim through the Homestead Act.

The Fence is just a wooden afterthought... We're imprisoned already.

-- Rutherford B. Hayes (The Barn at the End of Our Term paragraph 122)

Importance: Hayes and the other president-horses prepare to flee the Farm and the Barn in which they have found themselves after death. Hayes belatedly comes to the realization that they are not in Heaven, but still very much alive – except as horses.



Escaping the Farm will not allow them to escape their current bodily prisons. They may be escaped horses who used to be presidents, but to the outside world, they will always be horses. In effect, they can never escape their presidencies, as the rest of their life still waits beyond their terms. They will always be seen as presidents, just as they are now to be seen as horses despite whatever else they may have done in life.

I mean, you really should try to look as much like a krill as you can.

-- Dougbert Shackleton (Dougbert Shackleton's Rules for Antarctic Tailgating paragraph 25)

Importance: Dougbert explains that when rooting for Team Krill, one must pretend to be a krill. This includes learning how to swish like a krill. Dougbert also explains that the de-facto commissioner of tailgating, a short red-nosed Irishman named Denny Fitzpatrick, even looks like a krill. Dougbert says that anyone who roots for Team Krill should look like a krill. In reality, rooting for Team Krill is like rooting for the people who study, live, and work in Antarctica. The continent is the Whale; the people there are the krill, and will ultimately lose against nature and the wilds of the continent when it comes down to it.

Memories are inoperable. They are fixed inside a person, they can't be smoothed or soothed with fingers... But if it turns out that she really can adjust them from without? Reshuffle the deck of his past, leave a few cards out...

-- Narrator (The New Veterans paragraph 239)

Importance: As Beverly begins to work with Zeiger through massage therapy, she wants to take away his pain and his bad memories. She discovers that she has the power to do this. At first, she tries to alter the memories so that Zeiger feels less guilt, but this doesn't last. The past comes back. As a result, Beverly actually changes his memories of the day completely, leaving Mackey's death out. While this takes away Zeiger's memories, it also takes away his inching tendency toward suicide.

What threat, exactly, was this scarecrow keeping away from Friendship Park?

-- Larry (The Graveless Doll of Eric Mutis paragraph 72)

Importance: Larry and his friends, upon discovering the scarecrow that resembles Eric Mutis, are baffled by it, who put it there, and why. They imagine, at first, that it might have been placed there to keep some threat away, but in reality, it was placed there to attract something – memories of the past. The presence of the scarecrow forces Larry to confront his past as a bully to Eric, to feel guilty about it, and to seek ways to redeem himself.