The Holy Ones:
Stories

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ABSTRACT

The Holy Ones is a collection of five short stories and two novellas exploring relationships and solitude through a fabulist prism. In keeping with the tenants of fabulism, most of these stories take the primary world as their starting point and imbue it with one magical, mystical, or absurd quirk. While these stories are somewhat strange, they attempt to find relevance and resonance in the banality of their characters' desires: a wizard wishes to rent the perfect apartment, a group of boys want to ask their crushes to the school dance, a Mennonite girl wants to climb a sycamore tree, and so on. *The Holy Ones*, like many fabulist collections, combines the mystical with the banal in an attempt to defamiliarize common emotions and experiences—like a fear of commitment, adolescent love, a search of a higher power, and so on—and perhaps, at least momentarily, return these emotions and experiences to their original state of strangeness.

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I want to thank the publications that published versions of three stories from *The Holy Ones*. Thanks to *Existere* for publishing "Egg and Flour" in the Spring / Summer 2023 issue. Thanks to *Hunger Mountain Review* for publishing "Baby" in its Summer 2023 issue. Thanks to Amber Sparks for selecting "Hair, Teeth" as the third place winner in *Fractured Lit's* Monsters, Mystery, and Mayhem Prize and thanks to *Fractured Lit* for publishing it. In a strange bit of coincidence, Sparks is one of the writers I mention to help define the term fabulism.

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ARTIST STATEMENT

Several years ago, I was thrift-shopping for books with my brother and he handed me one with a wizard on it. “I have no time for wizards,” I told him flatly, mostly as a joke. It turns out I was deeply, deeply wrong. *The Holy Ones*, a collection of short stories and two novellas explores, broadly, relationships and solitude through a fabulist lens; the story I’ve worked on the longest, “The Wizard Story,” explores these themes in the character of a wizard. While I will delineate the themes of my thesis in greater depth, my primary focus is to define fabulism and situate it in the contemporary literary landscape by considering its historical antecedents, current practitioners, and its interaction with the short story form. I will also explain my use of the genre’s common tropes and suggest the broader aims of a fabulist short story.

Defining fabulism is particularly pertinent because the contemporary literary landscape features many overlapping genres. As Joshua Miller notes in the introduction of *The Cambridge Companion to Twenty-First Century American Fiction*, “slipstream is the new mainstream, and genre play has not become exceptional, but the methodological starting point” for many contemporary writers (13). Indeed, genre borders in today’s literary landscape are porous if not eroded, and high/low or literary fiction/genre fiction distinctions don’t exist as they once did. Moreover, towering genre terms like “fantasy,” “science fiction,” and “horror” seem simultaneously too broad and parochial to describe the nimble, idiosyncratic contemporary fiction that interpolates their tenants or sensibilities; it’s less clear, however, what genre these genre-bending stories are participating in themselves. As such, rather than leaving a mass of nebulously genre-ish fiction unnamed, critics have taken to demarcating the landscape with greater specificity, resulting in a proliferation of sub-genres like “slipstream, Avant-Pop, New Wave Fabulism, New Weird” (Jeff Hicks and Mark Young). The precise borders between these

sub-genres seem thin, but at the same time, situating the work within a genre affords unique opportunities through which to understand it.

The Holy Ones engage in this sort of genre play, drawing on elements of genre fiction even as the collection's sensibility resists that designation. In "The Wizard Story," a late-20s wizard seeks the perfect top-floor apartment, hoping it will help him practice magic; in "The Blender," four anxious, self-loathing ninth-graders stumble upon a blender that doesn't blend items, but swaps them; in "Hair, Teeth," a pair of alien figures use a mysterious leaf blower and lawnmower to destroy a town; in "Ethics," every character is born with a primary ethic, causing the narrator, whose ethic is efficiency, to spiral when his newly purchased house has a seemingly unfixable sink. Stories like mine have been described with many different terms, including "fabulism," "weird fiction," "The New Weird,"[1] and "magical realism."[2] While these terms share borders and many common elements, fabulism best describes the stories in *The Holy Ones* in intent, use, and implication.

As Katlyn E. Williams describes, "fabulism is expressly attached to incorporating fantastical elements associated with older forms, like the fairy tale, myth, fable and legend, into a realist setting (131). In this way, fabulism introduces a fantastic element into an otherwise realist context. In response to Karen Russell's fabulist stories, critic David Galef reiterates that fabulism wants to trouble the tenants of reality with one fantastical disruption: "The trick is to propose one

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[1] Similar to fabulism, but traces is origins back to H.P. Lovecraft, pulpy stories of the 30s, and is associated with the horror tradition (VanderMeer ix).

[2] This term was coined by the German art critic Franz Roh in 1923 in response to a piece of visual art. In literary studies, the term is strongly associated with Latin American writers, and often with a postcolonial bent. Kenneth S. Reeds suggests magical realism often uses fantastic elements to "elucidate aspects of their own cultures which were difficult to represent through more traditional methods" (259). *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* says something similar vis-à-vis magical realism commenting on political realities: "The fantastic attributes given to characters in such novels—levitation, flight, telepathy, telekinesis—are among the means that magic realism adopts in order to encompass the often phantasmagoric political realities of the 20th century." My stories don't really feature this political element.

tenet that runs counter to our world, then extrapolate along logical lines until the whole affair seems plausible" (149). This preoccupation with a singular change vis-à-vis the nature of reality is what separates fabulism from the broad genres it borrows from, like science fiction and fantasy. Robert Hunter Whitworth teases this out, writing, "[v]ery often, a work of fantasy or science fiction feels the need to explain the existence of non-realistic elements in the world. But to the irrealist,[3] the results of the events, (Gregor Samsa's transformation into a bug, Barthelme's town overrun by zombies) are what is interesting, not the causes" (x-xi). Indeed, whereas the science fiction or fantasy story is tasked with developing a self-consistent set of metaphysics for a secondary world, the fabulist tale takes the contemporary world as its starting point and imbues it with one metaphysical quirk, like a man transforming into a bug.

Amber Sparks suggests something similar, writing that fabulism "incorporates fantastical elements within a realistic setting—distinguishing it from fantasy, in which an entirely created world (with constructed rules and systems) is born." Similarly, whereas science fiction or fantasy might feel compelled to explain its non-realistic, Sparks notes that in fabulism "[s]trange things happen and characters react by shrugging: animals talk, people fly, the dead get up and walk around." She quips, "fabulism feels like the kind of dream in which you look down and realize reality has forgotten its pants." Fabulism, then, describes a story that incorporates fantastic elements, or one fantastic element, into an otherwise realistic setting, where the element is perceived as banal. *The Holy Ones* co-opts this sort of formula and ethos; people acknowledge the wizard in "The Wizard Story" the way they might acknowledge a local celebrity; in "Hair,

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[3] Whitworth's point here is in relation to "irrealism," a term popularized in literary circles in the 1980s by John Gardner to describe writers working in non- or extra-realist forms, including Donald Barthelme, Franza Kafka, and John Barth. This term doesn't have much currency currently, which is why I'm not using it. Much of Whitworth's analysis is in keeping with the fabulist ethos, probably because, in his opinion, irrealism is an umbrella term fabulism falls under: "It is also important to differentiate between the types of irrealism. The kind practiced by Kafka, and today by George Saunders, is heavily moral and might be called fabulism" (xiii). As it pertains to this essay, and as Whitworth theorizes it, irrealism is essentially synonymous with fabulism.

Teeth," a lawnmower buzzsaws through a car and leaf blower disperses into the ether, and no one blinks; everyone takes for granted in "Ethics" that everyone has a primary ethic that dictates the way they behave.

Although fabulism is fairly new term,[4] its roots are in fables and myths, and it traces its lineage through writers like Nikolai Gogol and Franz Kafka, who engaged with the fable form. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, a fable is "[a] brief tale in verse or prose that conveys a moral lesson, usually by giving human speech and manners to animals and inanimate things." At its roots, the fable is both fantastic and didactic; the proto-fabulists, like Gogol and Kafka, enacted and subverted these elements. Gogol's early short stories about rural Ukraine read like traditional fables, featuring clear lessons and demonic figures who appear as material consequences for moral or religious bankruptcy. Some of his later stories, however, including "The Nose," co-opt elements of the traditional fable to more opaque ends, which positions Gogol as one of the "progenitors of fabulism" (Donaldson 274). While "The Nose" features a fantastic element, it's not spiritual or ghostly: it is a nose leaving a man's face and appearing as, among other things, a full-grown man. Moreover, the story doesn't connect the nose to any moral point, and as George Saunders observes, when it does return, it has nothing to do with what Kovalyov does or "stops doing" (302). In this way, Gogol's proto-fabulist stories depart from the traditional fable even as they're haunted by the form; he incorporates a fantastic element, but it's not a talking animal or demonic figure, and he eschews a clear moral, instead using the fantastic element to render a shadowy sense of ennui and dispossession.

[4] Curiously, the critic Robert Scholes coined the term "fabulation" in the 1960s, which, "like the ancient fabling of Aesop, tends away from the representation of reality but returns toward actual human life by way of ethically controlled fantasy. Many fabulators are allegorists. But the modern fabulators allegorize in peculiarly modern ways" (11). His definition seems to anticipate contemporary fabulism in describing writing that moves outside of realism; he identifies John Barth, Robert Coover, John Gardner, Thomas Pynchon, and William Gass as fabulators.

Franz Kafka, the writer Gregory Ariail argues "reanimated" the fabulist genre in the 20th century, engages with the fable in a similar manner to Gogol, drawing on its tropes even as he subverts them (iv.). In his most salient example of proto-fabulism, *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka incorporates a fantastic, animalistic element by having Gregor Samsa transform into a large bug. Otherwise, however, the story eschews the fable form in favour of something that resembles contemporary fabulism. While Samsa's family is understandably shaken by his transformation, and never stop fearing him as a bug, they don't reject it on metaphysical grounds. As David Cronenberg suggests, they don't consider that a large bug has eaten Samsa or chased him out; they recognize the bug is him (11). They don't quite shrug as they might in a fabulist story, but they do accept the absurd metaphysics of the world. The text also departs from the traditional fable form by refusing to equate the fantastic element to a clear, moral point. The common interpretation of *The Metamorphosis* suggests that Gregor's transformation materializes the degradation and alienation he feels. As John Gardner argues, the "particular details of psychological reality are directly translated into physical reality" (137). However, critics have tied the transformation to ideas as wide as original sin, the fear of aging, and self-punishment. As G.S. Evans notes, "to reduce it to one or the other of the interpretations is impossible, since there is no explanation for the event that triggers the story" (156). In any case, Kafka renders the transformation to hyperbolize a feeling of alienation, rather than offer a moral directive, and in this way resists the conventions of the fable and anticipates contemporary fabulism.

Contemporary fabulism follows from Kafka's model, integrating fantastic elements not to offer a moral directive, but to articulate complex emotions, sometimes even literalizing the feeling via fantastic means. While fabulism is aware of its roots in fables, Williams notes that it defies "the oppressiveness of the pat morality plays found in archaic fairy tales and myths"

(126). Instead, the genre wants to "focus on the banal everyday emotions of romantic and family love" and "challenge classic themes of domestic fiction, like the failing marriage, intimate friendships…and family dysfunction" (125-6). Often, the fabulist uses a fantastic element in an otherwise quotidian setting to foreground "a radical unknowability that effectively communicates the complicated emotional realities of every day, supposedly ordinary, domestic experience" (Williams 127). At times, as Williams suggests in examining Kelly Link's short story, "Stone Animals," wherein a husband and wife buy a haunted house, the element literalizes a feeling: "the haunting ripples outwards and literalizes Catherine and Henry's fears, a common theme in fabulist literature in general" (154). The fabulist short story, then, uses fantastic elements to articulate and occasionally literalize complex human emotions.

In this way, fabulism packs an emotional punch because it defamiliarizes otherwise rote or banal feelings. Coined by Russian literary critic Viktor Shklovsky, defamiliarization refers to "de-automizing perception" such that a feeling, object, or event can be seen as though "for the first time" (93, 81). Shklovksy writes, "the device of art is the 'ostranenie'[5] of things and the complication of the form, which increases the duration and complexity of perception, as the process of perception is its own end in art and must be prolonged" (80). Fabulism achieves a sense of defamiliarization by locating fantastic elements in otherwise mundane, realistic settings, and in so doing, creates scenarios that feel strange and new. As Whitworth notes, fabulism features characters with goals that are "extremely plausible, often bordering on the mundane" (xi) and notes that "a crossroads of the fantastic and the mundane is critical to the effectiveness" of the genre (xii). This convergence defamiliarizes otherwise familiar emotions or scenarios, jolting readers, and allowing them to consider something anew. For instance, George Saunders'

[5] Commonly translated as "defamiliarization."

story, “Semplica Girl Diaries” features a father who wants to impress his family by purchasing human lawn ornaments, which are in vogue. Saunders uses this premise to defamiliarize parental anxiety, class, and oppression. Karen Russell defamiliarizes adolescent alienation in “The Graveless Doll of Eric Mutis” by having the bullied titular character become a scarecrow. In her story “The New Boyfriend,” Kelly Link defamiliarizes teenage desire by including the latest fad: robotic boyfriends.

The Holy Ones uses the same fabulist strategy, featuring stories at the crossroads of the fantastic and mundane, to defamiliarize otherwise familiar events and emotions. Each of my characters, in keeping with Whitworth’s point, have a banal, mundane desire. In “Egg and Flour” and “Baby,” the main character wants to have a baby; in “Hair, Teeth,” the protagonist ostensibly wishes to live undisturbed in his home; the wizard in “The Wizard Story” wants a top-floor apartment suite with a turret room; the man in “Ethics” wants his sink to work without creating a kidney-shaped pool of water; in “The Holy Ones” Liesel wants to climb a sycamore tree in her backyard; the four boys in “The Blender” want to ask their crushes to the school dance. However, while these desires are familiar, the fabulist context defamiliarizes them, imbuing their desires with an outsized sense of significance. For instance, the man is so desperate to have a child he devotes his adult life to writing about raising a child in word document; two men in “Hair, Teeth” completely destroy the man’s house and town with a lawnmower and leaf blower; the wizard wants an apartment with a turret because he thinks it will help him practice magic; the man wants to fix his sink so his primary ethic of efficiency isn’t constantly violated, causing him to tailspin; Liesel thinks God might exist in a concentrated form at the top of the tree; the boys are compelled to use an alien blender on themselves to impress their crushes with their appearance. These characters have mundane wants, but the architecture they exist within imbue

these wants with strangeness and significance. In turn, I hope the stories offer a new angle on old themes like love and commitment, anxiety about economic precarity, the degree to which a person can change, a quest for the divine, teenage insecurity and so on.

As the examples indicate, fabulism is premise-based. The short story is suited well to the genre because it allows the writer to iterate on the fabulist formula, pushing its premise to its logical and often absurd end, and end the story before it becomes grating or unwieldy. The compressed form of the short story requires the writer to push their premise forward quickly, but also lends a short story collection a sense of variety. In this sense, each story serves as a thought experiment with its own unique quirk that affects its theme and commentary. When these stories are compiled, they often create a constellating effect, where each of the stories seems to circle around a reality that's like ours but differs from it, and the other proposed realities in the collection, in significant ways. This not only prioritizes a sense of imagination and play, but also carves out space for the writer to trouble the nature of reality in a number of ways. For this reason, and many others, several foremost contemporary fabulists like Karen Russell, Kelly Link, George Saunders, and Ramona Ausubel work primarily in the short story form.

While the short story form suits fabulism in that its compression allows the writer to iterate on the fabulist formula with brevity and variety, the short story is suited to fabulism in a variety of other ways. Broadly speaking, the short story is typified by singularity. Per the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms,* "[a] short story will normally concentrate on a single event with only one or two characters," and as Edgar Allan Poe famously suggested, should be readable in a single sitting (Patea 10). In the article "The Short Story: An Overview of the History and Evolution of the Genre" Viorica Patea draws out the implication of these facts; namely, that the primary characteristics of the short story are "compression and concentration" (9). These

characteristics are suited to fabulism’s goals. As noted, fabulism often focalizes a common theme or feeling via hyperbole. In Romana Ausubel’s story “Chest of Drawers,” a man develops cabinet drawers in his chest during his wife’s pregnancy; the fabulist element helps hyperbolize anxiety about having a child. In this way, the fabulist short story not only concentrates on a singular element, but then hyperbolizes that single element to bring it into further focus.

The compression required in a short story often creates a strong sense of implication; fabulism relies on this sense of implication or subtext when establishing the metaphysics of the world. As Patea notes, “[t]he aesthetics of economy accounts for the genre’s cryptic and elliptical nature. Brevity prevents the short story from being cumulative and does not allow for extended explanations” (12). Cryptic and elliptical describe many fabulist stories, perhaps most notably in the way they establish the fantastic element in their world. For instance, in George Saunders’ story “Adams,” the story’s rules are offered at a dizzying rate: Adams, the narrator’s neighbour, is found in the narrator’s home in his underwear (or shorts), facing the room of the narrator’s children; the narrator is upset by this, but sets things right by “wonking” Adams and later proxy-wonking Adams’ family members. Asked to account for himself, Adams says, “I am what I am” (102). The established rules in the story are deeply strange, very cryptic, and paradoxically expansive. While Adams’ behaviour is perceived as odd in the story, his cryptic response both accepts and refuses to take responsibility for himself, and since his response links his behaviour to a recognizable cause, it implies there’s a vocabulary for his affliction, indicating there might be others like him. If Saunders is cryptic about Adams’ behaviour and the cause of it, he’s forthright about the narrator’s use of violence, which also creates a sense of expansion via compression. In particular, Saunders presents the narrator’s violence as a mere matter of fact, and in so doing, normalizes it. Consequently, it creates the impression that violence has

permeated society in the world of the story. In this way, Saunders establishes the primary facts of the story and lets their implications resonate. Indeed, many fabulist short stories use compression to this end, establishing the metaphysical disruption to the world and proceeding as though it is banal, which helps normalize the quirk and leaves the reader to consider its implications.

Beyond the sensibilities that arise naturally from the short story form, like concentration and compression, short stories are suited to fabulism in their tendency to explore the mysterious, strange, or ineffable. Patea even suggests there's a causal connection: "The mystery of the short story proceeds…from the compactness, intensity and economy of its short form. The mysterious is provoked by the readers' intuitions of an unresolved and unstated reality, which becomes amplified in the absence of explanatory elements" (15). The demands of the form, then, restrict the writer from explaining too much, and rather than that omission being a detriment to the story, it becomes a key way of rendering mystery. In addition to the consequences of the form, Mary Rohrberger observes that short stories, since their inception, have asked their readers to enter "a world of inexplicable strange loops, a mystical world of paradox and ambiguity, of shadows and shifting perspectives governed not by the rational order but by intuition and dream logic" (6). In this way, short stories in general ask the reader to suspend their disbelief and enter into a dreamy world. Fabulism follows from this ethos, but pushes it further, leaning into the mystical, strange, and dreamy by self-consciously employing fantastic elements. The consequences of this sense of mystery also tether the short story and fabulism together. María Jesús Hernáez Lerena suggests that a short story "baffles notions of knowledge as comprehension and instead confers climactic status on states of bewilderment, focusing on a paradigmatic encounter with strangeness" (175). As such, the short stories technical features, roots and associations, and ends are well-suited to rendering encounters with strangeness, a feature at the very heart of fabulism.

Indeed, many fabulist short stories resolve with aporic encounters with the strange or ineffable. In Karen Russell's story, "Barn at the End of Our Term," past United States presidents have been reincarnated as horses in the same stable. The horses live in fairly comfortable, domesticated life, but some dream of leaping over the pasture's fence; at the very end Rutherford does, rendering an interstitial moment as the horse crosses this mysterious border. The story, however, does not depict the reality of the world beyond the stable. Instead, it relies on compression to leave the reader in a state of bewilderment about Rutherford's future life. George Saunders also materializes the mysterious in his short story, "CommComm," wherein the narrator is killed, and, like his parents who were killed by burglars, becomes a ghost. At the end of the story, the narrator, with the help of his also-deceased and previously ridiculed co-worker, tells his parents they're already dead; in turn, they're free to pass from this earth, which, in the final moments of the story, Saunders depicts as a place of oneness and love. In this way, Saunders relies upon Buddhist dream-logic to resolve the story, offering a brief, fleeting vision of the afterlife without explaining away its mystery.

The stories in *The Holy Ones* also culminate with encounters with the ineffable and strange. In "The Wizard Story," the wizard endeavors, and ultimately betrays his partner, to obtain a lease to a top-floor apartment with a turret. Inside it, the wizard snaps his fingers and finds himself enveloped in a plume of smoke, out of which an image of his ex-partner, Lily, and her painting, emerges. In the climactic moment, then, the wizard confronts the strange: that he's able to practice magic. Liesel, in "The Holy Ones," desires to climb the sycamore in her backyard, thinking that God might speak to her in it. At the end of the story, Liesel climbs the tree, and, rather than experiencing "a paradigmatic encounter with strangeness," she tilts her head to heaven and anticipates one. The narrator in the "The Blender" sticks his face in a

mysterious blender, which turns it into a smooth, rock-like surface with slits; when he arrives at the dance with his friends, his crush's face is like his. In a certain sense, their encounter with each other is an encounter with strangeness. The story ends with the characters describing the other as "beautiful."

At times, the fantastic element in fabulism leads to a climactic encounter with the strange by crossing boundaries or rendering a mystery; in other instances, a fabulist story is permeated by a sense of strangeness, not to serve the story's arc, but to name an otherwise inexpressible idea. Kelly Link suggests that fabulist elements should exist without a tight, real-world analog: "I don't want a reader's grasp of a story to come down to a one-to-one meaning. I want there to be some (actually, a lot) of drift. The more closely and specifically you anchor the fantastic element to one particular symbolic meaning, the less room you leave readers to attach their own insights, questions, perturbations." As Link indicates, fabulism sometimes uses a fantastic element not to make a point that directly correlates to reality, but rather to locate and explore an amorphous feeling. In Lee Henderson's story, "The Unfortunate," a boy is born with a football-shaped head, and while his peers reject him on this basis, the cause of his physical state is unclear, and as such, so is its thematic implications. It seems to image malaise and alienation, but Henderson never directly confirms this notion in the story. Similarly, in "Bang Crunch," Neil Smith depicts a girl whose age contracts and expands at an accelerated rate; in a matter of months, she reaches elderly status, and soon after, her aging reverses until she dies as a baby. Like the proto-fabulist stories of Gogol and Kafka, some contemporary fabulism eschews one-to-one analog meanings, and attempts to name something shadowy and ineffable, which opens space for prismatic interpretations.

While the stories in *The Holy Ones* attempt to gesture toward a primary, discernable theme, some create space for multiple interpretations by trying to name something ineffable. Of all my stories, “Hair, Teeth,” operates on this logic the most. In it, two mysterious men arrive in an unnamed town and raze it with a lawnmower and leaf blower. As the narrator suggests, they give the town “a perfect buzzcut.” The story depicts the narrator’s initial incredulity giving way to resignation. At the end of the story, he co-opts the phrase “[t]hey’re taking it from here,” which signals his acceptance of their project of destruction. There are real-world analogs the story could be commenting on, like the housing crisis, the rise of artificial intelligence, or gentrification. My intention was broader than that, however, and more shadowy. In this story, I attempted to image an amorphous fear about, broadly speaking, hauntings and dispossession. Similarly, while the wizard in “The Wizard Story” is coded to be an artist of sorts, the top-floor suite, his use of magic, and his being a wizard don’t have a direct, correlative meanings. My intention was to meditate on themes of solitude, vocation, and commitment, but these elements, I think, lend its themes a shadowy, more opaque sheen.

Fabulism’s incorporation of fantastic elements, use of hyperbole, and interest in imaging the ineffable all serve to render elements of reality that realistic fiction might not have a vocabulary for. In this way, fabulism doesn’t intend to depart from reality per se, but depict it from unobserved angles. As Patea notes, “[t]he short story probes the nature of the real, which proves more complex than the reality of mere appearances” (15). Fabulism probes into the real by disrupting its metaphysics and rules, often to suggest “a lack of certainty between dreams and reality, or the real and unreal” (Williams 134). Since fabulism is primarily interested in rendering familiar or ineffable experiences, it uses these tools to ultimately “approach the ‘real’ in ways in which realism has failed” (Labuschagne 84). The fabulist writer Steven Millhauser

picks up on this point, writing, “I mess with reality in the name of reality…I mess with the assumption that reality is perfectly captured by middle-of-the-road realist fiction. I’d argue that the conventions of the realist story don’t begin to do justice to the blazing thing that deserves the name of reality.” In this way, fabulism’s tools and sensibilities are fantastic, but its ultimate aim is to render feelings and experiences with the sort of accuracy and honesty that realism might not have the vocabulary to offer.

While most of the stories in *The Holy Ones* are clear examples of fabulist writing, some exist nearer to realism’s end of the spectrum, with some posing direct questions to the reader about the nature of reality. As noted, “Hair, Teeth,” “The Wizard Story,” and “The Blender” are clear examples of fabulism because they’re imbued with one fantastical element. “Ethics” is haunted by fabulism, in that the story departs from reality in one major way, but this departure isn’t fantastic per se: the quirk is that people simply have exaggerated personalities. “Egg and Flour” follows from an ethos of weirdness, but its world is, by all accounts, realist. “The Holy Ones” and “Baby” are harder to classify. The latter unfolds as a weird piece of historical fiction, but the story’s central question is whether God exists at the top of the sycamore tree or not. When Liesel eventually climbs it, she tilts her head to the sky, feels a presence, and waits to learn a mystery. In a sense, I am asking the reader whether or not God could be up in the tree. In “Baby,” a companion piece to “Egg and Flour,” a man spends his life writing in a document, where he describes raising a child. At the end of the story, after 30-plus years of writing, culminating in his textual son’s wife giving birth, he closes the laptop; in the next room, he thinks he hears a baby crying. The placement of these stories, as bookends, is intentional. While “Egg and Flour” exists as a realistic piece of fiction, the stories that come after it are mostly fabulist. As such, I want the fantastic elements to accumulate as the collection progresses, so that

by the end, fabulism has perhaps overcome the otherwise realist-seeming story "Baby." The end of the story attempts to ask the reader if it's a fabulist story, or not: is the crying baby a delusion, or, within the architecture of the collection, might it actually exist?

Broadly speaking, this is the aim of fabulism: it wants to interrogate the nature of reality, test the borders between reality and dreams, explore complex emotions for which realism might not have a vocabulary, and defamiliarize familiar feelings and experiences. *The Holy Ones* shares these aims, imbuing otherwise banal scenarios with absurd or fantastic quirks, asking, over and over: what would the ineffable look like if it was made material? What if the world had glimmers of magic? What if you made time to think about wizards?

In keeping with the sensibilities of fabulism, I'll leave these questions to the reader.

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