

Web Exclusive Interview: Libby Flores



Our March Web Exclusive story, "[Good](#)," viewed a goodbye from the perspective of the one who did the dick move, "the bad guy," reminding us that good writing isn't at all interested in concept of "the bad guy." Author Libby Flores talked with us about writing the other side of the story, Amy Hempel's advice about tackling a big concept, and how Tom Waits lyrics are basically terrific flash fiction.

Erin McReynolds: "Good" is nothing short of masterful in how much it gives in so few words: in a scene from part of this one day, we intuit enough of their background to know how this is going to affect both of them—even a very good guess how a future scene between them would go. What part of this came to you first, do you remember?

Libby Flores: I'd love to know what your vision for a future scene would be! Thank you for those kind words. I do remember seeing that scene, that walk to the beach. I was mining the idea of a secret burning in his chest, of the urgency of confession. The pull of his unfaltering desire and the fact that he's harbored it for so long—that is what kept me there.

EM: The imagery and language in this are so strong—do you have a background in art or music? I don't know why I sense that.

LF: While a lover of both, no, I don't, but art and music play a big role in my work. I once wrote a story inspired by a J.M.W. Turner painting. The private act of creation no matter the discipline and artist's processes are things that will never fail to take me under. I used this as an epigraph for the story where he was a great influence: *"My job is to draw what I see, not what I know."* J.M.W. Turner on why his painted ships had no portholes. That sums it up.

There was a song for "Good." There is one for almost all the stories I write. I play the piece on repeat while writing—depending how difficult the story is proving to be, by the time it's done, I've listened to that song hundreds of times. It's a guide or a touchstone for the story. I need to hypnotize myself a bit to write. This is the way I do that. The song has to live in the emotional resonance of what I am working on. Sometimes I can get a whisper of an idea from an initial listening of something. That was the case here.

With "Good" it was "Jesus She's a Good Girl" by Andy Shauf. Unusual for me in that most of the songs I use do not have words. Generally they are too distracting. I am in no way attempting to echo my story to the songwriters' story. (And funny how Meredith is anything but a "good girl.") But, when I heard that song, while driving (I live in LA so I do lots of that), it struck me as a melodic marvel. There was a line of his that pulled at me—"Why do you always make a liar when I am trying to tell the truth?" And there, my secret was born.

EM: I can see Meredith, down the line, dismissing him as an "asshole" or a "manipulative psycho," or any other number of epithets my friends and I used to deride people who'd hurt us; so to walk in his footsteps for this brief moment is to be reminded that often when someone disappoints us, they have to live with their own disappointment. It's not really a balm by any means, but it's not as simple as "they won."

LF: Indeed, this what I hope to write toward in my collection. What is the other side? And yes, exactly how do both sides claim disappointment or heartbreak for that matter? Of course I don't see him as asshole, but I am in his head seeing out. I'd say in this story no one wins; it maybe illustrates how love or lost love reverberates, how it colors the world of the beholder, and how that torch they carry lights their way.

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EM: Flash fiction is an art of restraint—you wrote a 100-word story called "Legs," so I don't have to tell you. Do you start with too much and whittle away, or do you try to be spare with what you put down on paper to begin with?

LF: For me what is long and what is short is determined by the narrative that presents itself. I never whittle down. It's kind of like opening a folded map—it could have fifteen panels or just three. I love the compression of a moment or even a life. George Saunders' "Sticks" is a great example of both of these things.

The other thing I believe (or hope) is that a piece of flash should land. An ending line generally

sets the story down just so. In my experience if you haven't gotten there in a much shorter piece you have more to go.

I have readers/writers (thank God) that I will pass a draft to, and some will say, "Yes, great, this is enough." And some will say, "I want more." It then becomes a choice in the revision process. I ask: have I pulled all the threads through? Also wanting more is a compliment to the form. Flash fiction isn't the full meal, it's the amuse-bouche—at best it should linger and maybe breed a question, but never make you entirely full. I was lucky enough to hear Amy Hempel say: find a small way into a big idea. I see the ending of flash similar to the entry into it.

EM: Crazy, I was just watching a reading of *Jesus' Son* and a panelist mentioned this quote (Amy was supposed to be there)—I wrote it down. I often feel overwhelmed by the "big idea." Do you ever have to force yourself to open the folded map, as you say, slowly?

I love that others are quoting her wisdom. I think the "big idea" is, more often than not, a question the writer is poking at, or it's the concept you see in your mind that compels you to get it on the page. Easing into a voice, taking the pulse of a character's desire is important, and something that is not to be rushed. Sometimes you slow down to know where you are going. I've heard other flash writers say some pieces come out whole (those are gifts) and for some pieces it's years of Jenga—getting the sentences placed just right. I've experienced both.

EM: Going back to Amy Hempel's "find a small way into a big thing," have you ever started small only to find it was going to have to be much bigger? Or vice versa?

LF: No, not really. Perhaps the less interesting answer is: it's a feeling, it's intuitive. I think with flash fiction or short shorts, notably the language is dense, every line weighs heavy and must count. You are tunneling down into something quickly and siphoning the essence of that moment, that life, or that scene, and I can always feel that. It's distinct from a string of scenes or starting a longer story where you can stretch into a moment, look back or look forward. Where the heat or carrot of the narrative is further off in the distance, and it's all about the getting there.

EM: What are you drawn to these days, and what have you been reading?

LF: I've been drawn to Tom Waits (all albums), Dustin O'Hallaron, Gorecki Symphony #3, cheeseburgers coupled with beer, and poetry. Maybe grief points you there. I've heard lots of people say poetry has been one way to cope in our current climate. For me it's been Jack Gilbert, Carl Phillips, Robert Frost, Ellen Bass, Langston Hughes, and Rilke in particular. I just read Deb Olin Unferth's new great collection and I am savoring *300 Arguments*. I also loved and just finished reading Dana Johnson's *Not Quite Dark* and Kristen Radtke's *Imagine Only Wanting This*. My to-be-read pile is always about to topple over. I'm looking forward to reading *Exit West* and catching up on collections I've missed—*Battleborn* and *Barbara the Slut*. I'm also seeking out narratives involving awful/good men making hard choices, because when I am not reading I am finishing my collection of said men.

EM: Tom Waits is a great example of music that puts me in the mood to write, then I wind up just frustrated that I can't write a line as great as any of his.

LF: Yes, yes! *Invitation to the Blues* I'm convinced is a perfect short short. "She's a moving violation from her conk down to her shoes." Kills me.

[clear-line]

Libby Flores is a 2008 PEN Center USA Emerging Voices Fellow. Her short fiction has appeared in *Post Road Magazine*, *Tin House*, *The Open Bar*, *The Rattling Wall*, *Paper Darts*, *Bridge Eight*, *FLASH: The International Short-Short Story Magazine*, and *The Los Angeles Review of Books*. She lives in Los Angeles but will always be a Texan. She can be found at libbyflores.com.