



Barbara Lock, MD //

When I talked with writer and writing teacher David Ryan in mid-April 2021, more than a year into the pandemic, I was relieved to find his bright generosity intact. Ryan is my former writing professor. Class conversation was just as likely to hit on his heady days as drummer for The Lemonheads or his ten-year-old daughter's reading habits as on the use of metaphor in narrative. "The Stag Beetles," Ryan's essay inspired by his personal experience with cancer, first appeared in *Bellevue Literary Review* and was later reprinted in *Peripheries*.

The interview which follows has been edited and arranged for clarity and length.

**Dr. Barbara Lock: "The Stag Beetles" subverts the standard illness narrative; its craft seems to incorporate a number of techniques and sensibilities that I more commonly see in fiction. I'm wondering what kind of reactions you've had to the work.**

David Ryan: I read it in KGB Bar just before COVID really hit New York. It was exhilarating, the response. It was a packed room, and I went in there and [someone] sort of came up afterwards and was just kind of like, "I don't know what that was, but that was thrilling to hear."

**BL: (laughing) Let me just set the scene... The setting is a chemotherapy infusion center, or maybe the floor of a hospital?**

DR: It's an actual outpatient sort-of room in a hospital.

**BL: I imagine a large open room with curtained-off blue vinyl reclining chairs. I imagine each chair is matched with an infusion pump clamped to a metal pole. At the top of the pole are hooks from which nurses hang chemotherapeutic medications which drip into the arms of patients who are ill but ambulatory.**

DR: Yes. Yeah, so the bags are, in the story, the dead sylphs hanging from the chromium stands—sort of a distortion of those bags—with the biohazard logo on them, which is always a little jarring to watch dripping into your arm, you know.

**BL: Your narrative of the experience...is defamiliarized... In one passage, a chaplain and a patient who are directly in front of you whisper prayers to each other. Would you mind reading that passage?**

DR: Okay, I'll give it a shot.

*I closed my eyes as the two women sat at the table facing each other. They faced each other and began whispering into each other. It seemed how Sanskrit might sound in your lips if you took the slashes and turrets and hooks and loops and whispered them with sickles, bell curves, cap pistols that poofed in a cloud, and the glassy slobber of an infant or the destituted memory of a deer as its chest bled out on the snow in front of its fawn. Their speaking sounded like the delicate scarce lift of skinned breath, the raw heart of air in the trees, boats slapped on a pier, a flock of pheasant exploding from stalks of wheat or the sound of a first love in your throat as it catches decades later in the way you say I love you to someone you now know to be perfect. The sound of someone's hair in your mouth, the sound of how someone's leg tastes.*

**BL: There's this visceral reaction that you elicit in the reader, or at least you elicit in me...**

DR: Good!

**BL: ...it's a feeling of imminent threat or ongoing loss, but there's also this sense of potential beauty which might fill in the gap.**

DR: Thanks. That's the hope, I suppose.

**BL: I'm noticing that something like twenty percent of that passage concerns itself with realism, while about eighty percent concerns itself with imagination, metaphor, and drives, and yet the reader feels fully present in the scene. How does this work?**

DR: If you think in terms of the psyche, the text itself is consciousness. But the impulses, the drives, the instinctual drives, and the desires, hatred, the moods, all the things, none of that's conscious. Consciousness does not produce moods. It's the unconscious that does that... There's a god behind those words... The idea is: how much control over your unconscious can you let your consciousness have? Which is kind of radical idea! If you think about it, the idea that you can start

to train your writing so that it knows when to poke this beast and then let it slip out and then put it back in. It's a super powerful thing because all of our emotions are there.

Sometimes you'll find a text that's so literal, and it's concrete, and the words are perfect and everything else, and there's no emotion coming from it because it is sealed off. It's only the conscious text. And then you have other texts that are so wild and uncontrolled that they don't have emotion either because it's not been harnessed and pinned down at the right moments. You can think of it as a hook-and-loop, or quilting buttons. Lacan uses that idea—*pointes de capiton*. These moments when you allow metaphor to open up and explode and then you bring it back down. With a piece like this, my intention would be: I want you to feel something that I can't put into words, but I'm about to weep just saying that.

... Something that's at the top of my throat as I try to even step around it. You can't do that by sounding like, "It's awful!" You can't do that. That's Ruskin's pathetic fallacy, right? You can't write sickly prose to imply sickness. A state of boredom can't be conveyed boringly—it won't be effective.

... The twenty percent of the—let's say realist [prose]—is there to hold the reader down so they go with it. And then all of the crazy surrealist stuff is there to push the emotions...sensory details are important... There's a feeling coming off of [these very specific images]. The pure Freudian slips, let's say, where the unconscious is allowed to be released... The pinning of time and spatial representation of these images and ideas are all sort of conspiring together to keep the reader reading, but also to feel an emotion they didn't realize they were going to get from this simple story.

**BL: You mentioned that if you were to write a medical narrative from the socially realist perspective and all you're doing is describing how horrible things are, it could possibly fail to generate emotion. Can you go into that a little bit?**

John Ruskin, a 19<sup>th</sup> century critic, coined this term "pathetic fallacy," which is simply that you don't, in the discourse, imitate the state you're trying to create. If you're capturing a state of rage, and you write with all caps, you completely diminish the rage...there was a time when in cinema, in early cinema—you've seen this—in those early films when there's a train coming and somebody goes [gesture], and someone's strapped across the tracks and it's like "Ahhh!"

**BL: (Laughing) Right.**

DR: ...these silent actors would overdo it, and then you're left with, oh that's the representation of lust or whatever, or fear, or villainy. One of the most groundbreaking moments in cinema was this particular movie where a diabolic figure just stares at the camera, expressionless. And it so terrified people, that everyone realized that's how you do it... Hitchcock, in the movie *Psycho*—when the main character has been stabbed and she's at the base of the shower—there's these montage cuts of these expressions on her face. The last scene is of her completely still, staring straight ahead, and it's actually is an homage to that scene from that earlier film from the turn of

the 20<sup>th</sup> century of that dead stare. Ruskin...was saying...don't imitate the thing in your sentences. You need to have a certain detachment from it.

**BL: Would you read another passage for me? It's the one that starts with "By now there were women..."**

DR: Yeah, I'll try. This is hard. ... I should say: I had meningitis as a kid.

**BL: Oh?**

DR: I was seven or eight, but I don't remember much of it. I remember the pain of it. And I remember certain really isolated moments in the hospital [such as]...seeing my dad weeping...I don't know if preempting it with this is useful or not.

*By now there were women in my curtained area and on my programmable bed and on my head and chest and legs, the air was hot and then the prayer finished and the beetle-clicking stopped and one by one the women left the room and it cooled and became tolerable. I was always these days the last in the room. And, like I said, I hadn't told my mother or father. I'd already learned that mothers weep gutted in their womb while fathers' eyes swell as if to hide certain explosions in their blood and the repeated pulse of their brains bursting because their brains become their hearts but you can't say that without being cliché and you're a man after all, you can't say so many things that brush against love, so you sit there and feel your brains shotgunning your body and you lose your mind with this confusion between rage and what is probably love, a black and poisonous smoke that you want to reach out and eat you're so hungry.*

**BL: [My] sense was that this was more than about a man—you, literal you—whose desire was to stay alive. It really focused on this idea of love and familial love and paternal love...[I get a] very strong fatherhood vibe from this piece.**

DR: I'm glad that you felt that from it, because that's the secret story in this, the silent impulse that's driving it. It's operating actually contrary to everything that you're hearing in the conscious text. There's no mention of me as a father. There's no mention of a wife. There's no mention of a pregnant wife. And that's what was going on at that time. My wife was pregnant. And we found out within two days of each other, that I had cancer and that she was pregnant... The pressurized space around every single word in this story is that I had a daughter on the way... What you do is try to push the metaphor of your own experience onto something that you can make concrete. And in fact, these things really happened. I was describing things that really happened. But my choice, my selection of elements for this one particular story were drawn out of the ether of the thrill, anxieties, that I had felt. My word choices and the events that I chose, seemingly spontaneously? They were all from a repository of this one idea about what would it be like if my daughter never knew me. If I passed away and my daughter was someone who said, at age thirteen, "I never really knew my father." I felt I understood things, and then we had a kid, which is amazing, and I just

never knew... I now know what it feels like to be an animal. And I realize now, in retrospect, that I never understood that: those drives to survive and be a part of a family, and all of these things. So the story is doing hopefully precisely that...when I talk about my mother and father not being there, I'm talking about me not being there. The father being gutted with tears is me, whenever I thought about what it would be like to not ever know the birth of this daughter...I mean, the idea, oh my god.

**BL: Are you spiritually attuned?**

DR: Metaphor has become the spiritual driver for me because understanding it now has allowed me to write spiritually... We don't have access to God in a tangible way, right? Metaphor takes two things, they [get] bumped together, and they become something that no [one]...has a word for. It simply is this third thing that's expansive. That's where a story like "The Stag Beetles" is operating.

**Bios:** David Ryan is the author of the story collection *Animals in Motion* and *Malcom Lowry's Under the Volcano: Bookmarked*. A 2020 Artistic Excellence Fellow of the Connecticut Office of the Arts, his most recent work appears or is forthcoming in *Harvard Review*, *Conjunctions*, *Fiction*, *North American Review*, *The Minnesota Review*, *Fiction International*, and *Juked*. He teaches in the writing program at Sarah Lawrence College and in New England College's low residency MFA.

Barbara Lock, MD, an emergency physician at Columbia University Irving Medical Center, pursues a writing MFA at Sarah Lawrence College. Her fiction appears in *New Delta Review*, *Fiction International*, *Best Short Stories from the Saturday Evening Post's Great American Fiction Contest 2020*, and elsewhere.