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The Real Thing

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THE REAL THING

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing:
Fiction

by
Ruben Ty Rodriguez
June 2015
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Merrill Feitell, First Reader
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ABSTRACT

THE REAL THING is a collection of short stories released from the confinement of the everyday. The stories allow characters to burst off the page from every angle. With an eye for anthropomorphism and an ear for lyric, the collection is comprised of twenty-eight stories, eighteen of which work in a flash fiction form.

Magical in its motions and charming in its spirit, *The Real Thing* explores life’s losses and gains through the lens of the strange and at times the absurd. It invites its readers to cast away expectation, sit back and watch the show.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am beyond lucky. This manuscript is dedicated to my father, who is simply a better man than I, and to my mother whom I will never impress, though I promise I will always try.
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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE
NOTES ON THE REAL THING

When I moved out of our apartment, my father gave me a leather duffle bag he had received from the freight line he worked for. It’s where I keep a decade of notes and manuscripts. It is the foundation of my literary work. The Real Thing is an extension of that work.

As a collection of literary short fiction, it is my hope that the twenty-nine stories that comprise The Real Thing examine how people live together and apart. I feel that as a writer, I am entrusted with the responsibility of interpreting my time and place into a cultural record that can be looked at by future generations as a pseudo-truth.

The “real” in The Real Thing is a play on perception. The stories in the collection often contain characters that breakaway from standard avenues of consciousness, inviting animals, plants, and inanimate objects opportunity to speak up and take center stage in their stories. As a collection of literary fiction, I levy the weight of prime consciousness upon the surreal elements of my stories in order to balance their mystique on the page. I hope to bypass the cynicism of our day by easing reality and making things utterly unreal.

To do this The Real Thing enables the elements of the magical real by placing stories in a “normal” time and place while allowing for aspects of surrealism to guide the stories. Examples: giving life to a lawn ornament, using a
newspaper editorial written by a dog as primary text, or having characters crumble to dust on live television. Though there is a heavy leaning toward the magical real, it is important to note that not all of the stories rely on this skewing of reality. A few of the stories look at the human experience through a realist lens. These stories allow the distorting of experience to come through character perception as opposed to story perception. Here, the character imposes the abnormality upon the world that surrounds him when he is forced to confront the bizarre in order to exist in the real. The reason the stories of *The Real Thing* vary in their modes deals primarily with my writing process and its complete subservience to my subconscious, of which I am a big fan.

I call my subconscious Sampson and carry him around in my backpack. He’s a midget scribe with a too-big-head and haunches like a billy goat, so it’s a tight fit. As long as I feed him magical ideas, he’s willing to tuck his knees to his chest and write the damn stories for me. It’s me who has to do the revision, but Sampson’s got my back because Sampson’s got the stories.

He was gifted to me in a dream. Kerouac and Vonnegut presented him in a silver loving cup—the little guy, spilling out over the brim, all pudge and skin. Across his tablet sized chest was tattooed the credo that I have since taken as my own, *Everything is True. Everything is Eligible*. For I look at life much in the way I look at Sampson, giving up on expectation in preparation for the chaos that is life. After so many years, I can’t help but notice the similarities between
Sampson’s face and my own. If anyone ever saw him, they might think he were my son. He is a part me. That’s for sure, but I’m not ready to take full custody.

It is important for you to believe that Sampson is writing the stories. If not you might delve too deep into my history and self, and I am afraid of this. I feel that too often work is assessed in correlation with writer’s sociological makeup. This manifests in the writing community’s habit of labeling its writers.

While at CSUSB I have had the opportunity to attend the American Writers and Writing Programs Conference. It was at this conference in 2014, that I realized I was considered a writer of color. I was told so by other writers, who approached me, excited to let me in on the secret. The initial acceptance into this community felt great, as acceptance will, but before long, I realized this form of labeling was accompanied by expectation. I was suddenly a tangible voice for a people and culture in which I was not fully indoctrinated. At AWP a year later, my assigned class had less presence, though the expectations remained. A graduate program out of the University of El Paso took interest in me, or at least, the presence of me, or at least the pigment of my skin. A professor from the program called me over, reading my nametag with rolled r’s and Latin gusto. When I was unable to answer her questions in Spanish, disgust took her face. She had found an imposter.

This is what labeling does. It applies broad expectations that diminish work by trying to fit it in a box. I understand that at its core there is a search for understanding, and that should be appreciated. It is my charge that we should
strive to understand the individual if we are in search of humanity, and that to levy culture and its responsibility upon one person is not only unfair, it is ultimately limiting in scope. Though I believe my stories are separate from my story, I will grace you with my life’s tale on the pretext that we can both pretend it is fiction.

My mother was the oldest daughter of immigrant parents. A yellow caution sign with a silhouetted family of three might come to mind, but it wasn’t like that. Her father came with cash, a young wife, and dreams bigger than Mexico City. He bought himself a house, a Chevy Bel Air, and had five children in quick succession before he caught the cancer and died. Grandma Sarah took to a sowing machine and did the best she could, which was pretty damn good.

My father’s people come from the soil, crouched, and on their knees, making their way row by row. They’re shrewd accumulators out of the Imperial Valley—big dreamers who take minimal risks and keep their shoulders to the wheel, tallying zeroes in their bank accounts like a turnstile. My father came to his family last in the string of five. When truck driving pulled my grandfather out by the roots and planted him in a suburb of LA, the family went with him. It would be the end of the fields for all of them.

My parents met and had my sister young. Mom, 17. Dad, 19. Six years later I came along. By the time I turned four, my parents had taken the leap, moving our family to Murrieta, CA—gem of the valley. All across Southern
California, the first era of micro-mansions were popping up in boxy clusters—two story stucco homes with two and three car garages, high ceilings, and big windows. Things were good, though this lifestyle does develop children with a propensity for optimism. Mom had been sick, on and off, but nothing major the hospital couldn’t fix. Dad ran himself so ragged my sister often called me to her bedroom window to look out onto the cul-de-sac. She’d say, Look dad’s gone crazy. Dad would be pushing his lawn mower across the asphalt, coming home from a neighbor’s house.

Then came some bad luck. My dad lost his job when the owner of the freight line he drove for lost his shit and locked himself in a closet. For a year, my dad tried building a lawn care business while looking for a new gig. We might have been okay, but mom got sick again, and sick can be expensive. The house was lost, but dad found work driving a green truck with gold letters on its side. Everything seemed like it was going to be all hunky-dory, but the sick wouldn’t shake.

It was one of those long drawn out deaths, the kind that takes months to deliver. Declines are very similar to growths in that when you live with them, the result sneaks up on you, even if summer vacation brings a downstairs transformation complete with monitoring machines, IV drips, and a hospital bed. When she died, they took me from the house. I was shuttled away to a place I’d never been before—some grandparents of a second cousin. Exiled until the wake.
When I returned, the place had been cleaned and recleaned, the downstairs brought back to its function—every trace of her seemingly lifted by Pine-sol. Her clothes went somewhere and her stuff was boxed away in the garage. So many things in a house belong to the whole family. She was everywhere yet somehow confined to a picture, peering from its frame on the kitchen counter. She watched us blindly until the landlord’s daughter got knocked-up, and was given the house my family was living and dying in.

I want to tell you that Sampson wrote this. I want to pretend that he worked all day typing away to the cadence of my footfalls. I want to tell you that when my family reads this they will scold me for my lies, but like Sampson’s tattoo reads, *Everything is True*. If it wasn’t me and mine suffering, it was you and yours, or his and hers. I hide behind Sampson, because I can’t look my audience in the eye. I can’t pretend that I know any better than they do. If a midget scribe is writing the stories, then we can all take this less seriously. Not because the business at hand is not serious, but because it is so much so. I can’t hold this weight. It will break me. But if I pretend it’s not me holding up the pillars, than I think I got a chance.

Here is where I will take responsibility. My writing career has been herky-jerky at best. I am a victim of apathy and bureaucracy. The apathy is mine, the bureaucracy belonging to one institution after the other. Combined, they form a
conflict—a story about how a notion turns into a drive, and how that drive leads
to some sort of success.

Some will say writers are born. Others attest that they can be made. I
adhere to the second notion while infusing one condition. Writers are made—
wholly by their own efforts. These are some of mine.

After leaving high school, I found literature at a community college. I took
to scribbling in notebooks, writing poetry that invoked attitudes apparent in
Ginsberg’s *Howl*. I tried to write stories, but never made it past more than a few
sheets of paper. I had grand ideas for running narratives that explored the ardor
of growing up in the middle class. None of these stories found their way to
fruition, but I was working on something, transforming much in the way
caterpillars do—hidden and confined to the dark.

While floundering in community college, a good hearted creative writing
professor encouraged me to continue writing and turned me on to the idea of
seeking out an MFA. It was the first door opening into this madness. At around
the same time, I found work at the city library. Often, I’d drift into the stacks
finding my way to the 810 section—home of American Literature according to
Dewey and his Decimal System. Over and over I found my way to the same
books. 813.54 KIN and 818.52 HEM became my Bibles. Stephen King’s *On
Writing* and Ernest Hemmingway’s *A Moveable Feast* informed much of my
writing process.
From King, I learned the power of telepathy. He writes about writing as a voiceless mode of communication from one mind to the other. He presents the example of a white rabbit in a cage atop a table covered with a blue satin tablecloth. On the rabbit's back is a red number eight. Can you see it? I know you can. Boom! Telepathy—from Stephen King's brain to yours and you two haven't even met. Before the naysayers can offer their nays, I will admit this fudges the definitions of actual telepathy. What King is identifying as telepathy is a matter of clarity, and if you are around me enough you will hear me say, Clarity is king. It is the most important aspect of the written word. If the reader can't assess what the hell is going on in the story, than the venture is failed.

Hemingway’s lessons were simpler—determination and routine. Hemingway offers his earliest routine as a burgeoning writer. It required a place to write and a set time to do the writing. Alone he sat in a room, often finding a rhythm by allowing his mind the opportunity to dip into the work of others. When he wrote, he did so with the purpose of pushing the narrative forward. He followed his characters, allowing them to make decisions whether they went along with Hemingway’s notions or not. Most importantly Hemingway advised the importance of leaving the page, knowing what was to come next. By glimpsing the narratives future, the mind was given the opportunity to ponder the thought. I like to think Hemingway had a Sampson of his own, possibly called Hal. Hemingway’s process became my own. His adventures and success became my aspiration.
Though I didn’t find my way to the Alps, my journey took me through a bachelor’s degree in Creative Writing at the University of California, Riverside. While there, my illusions of the writing-life blossomed. I was suddenly inundated with the wide spectrum of literature being produced. Writing became more than a dream world, it was a modern day happening, but I was an expeditionary without a map. I was sure that I wanted to pursue my writing, sure that an MFA in Creative Writing was a reasonable next step, but I wasn’t sure how I would get there. I left UCR, two classes short of a degree.

I floated as a man without qualification. I knew I needed a routine, so I implemented one. In the desert, I escaped the heat by ducking into the public library to write 1500 words a day, five days a week, for six months. I ended up with a novel length manuscript and a handful of stories, I find myself revising to this day. Unsure what to do with this work; I tucked it in away in my leather bag and headed for the coast. This is where I lost sight of the goal. I found myself working for The Man, or some outstretched limb of The Man, in an attempted to ascend the corporate ladder and take my chunk of the American dream.

It took just over a year to realize I had veered off course. Over time I have attributed this year to life experience. I got mine in the form of menial labor and corporate greed. My burgeoning depression became a revelation—I didn’t care about the bottom line, my head belonged in the clouds. I quit my job over the phone and picked up a paintbrush. So began my year of hallucinogens.
When the year was done, I packed my bags, left the coast, and headed for the foothills of San Bernardino. I enrolled in the MFA program at CSUSB and got to work. I started small, and I started scared. I began by working in flash fiction—a genre defined by its brevity and adherence to familiar fiction notions that emphasize character and conflict. I wrote a story about finding a pineapple in a
dream and read it at the school’s first open mic of the year. Blind with fear, I raced through the story in front of my peers, b-lining it back to my seat when the story was over. People liked it. They told me so. It became my mission to write something new for every open mic, and I did. Nineteen of the stories that comprise *The Real Thing* are flash fiction, much of this has to do with my incessant need to impress. It has served me well.

If the stories weren’t written for readings, they were written from classroom prompts. Professor May-lee Chai, had a knack for assigning prompts that would later become some of my most successful stories. A postcard inspired a piñata execution, a comic from *The New Yorker* turned into a baby octopus haunting a young woman, and discussion about Japanese internment became the genesis of a lottery to the moon.

As my style evolved, my work moved further into the strange. With a bundle of flash behind me, I began working on longer narratives. During the summer between my first and second year, I took to the page, pushing myself to write full-length stories that kept to my magical-real tendencies while attempting to make tangible statements on the human condition. This led to stories about a bear skin rug searching for his home, a small glowing tree defining a father-son-relationship, and a mechanical hand taking the place of god. My stories are most interested in how we treat each other. In my opinion, we miss the mark, but I believe we can be better. This is my motivation.

This is how I do it.
As a writer, I am fully aware of the reader-writer agreement. It is a contract signed long ago when the human mind was first being developed. The reader-writer agreement states: Anything provided by the writer must be important to the story. With this in mind, the writer agrees to give credence to his reader’s intelligence, thus all things implied should never be stated. If anticipation is created, the writer agrees to fulfill the anticipation with a resolution. Note: secrets are for the weak and twists inflicted always result in pain.

There are two attitudes that will greatly help any writer keep to the reader-writer agreement—urgency and authority.

Urgency requires the writer to start his story without any ritualistic dancing, and to proceed in action, remembered, projected, or perceived. Character and conflict are the requirements of story—the reader should address both as quickly as possible. The writer is allowed absolute freedom within the work as long as the requirements of story are present. The urgency of any length of work should cause the reader to feel lifted from the page when he or she is finished with it. There is no need to check the time while reading within the parameters of the reader-writer agreement.

Authority is a matter of voice. The story is the writer’s. As his creation, he should be wholly knowledgeable of the players and world created. The telling of the story comes down to consistency and diction. It is the way the story is built at the joints that allows it to move. Authority is also presented through attentive use of active and accurate verbs and specificity of description. Verbs should not only
move, they should describe. Descriptions should not only point, but echo and amplify character and conflict.

For further insight into the mindset of me as writer I have included my 13 principles for walking through fire:

1. There is something to prove—every time.

2. Bring with you a bag of confidence, crack the shells between your molars, and let your tongue burn away to a nub.

3. The best time to wrestle the bear is every chance you get. You must wear him down if you ever want to beat him, and know that you may lose an eye or an arm or rupture your spleen.

4. Be willing to keel over and vomit upon yourself, and when these moments arise, find the jewels amongst the muck.

5. When the voice of God thunders, it does so like a chisel on stone. Nothing “seems” in this part of the universe, less you wish to see worlds implode with uncertainty.

6. If fish are your gifts, hand them over with plates and knives and forks, with seasonings and lemon, but never a napkin.

7. If a meteor shower shows itself, open up your shirt pocket and catch every last one, for someday the sky may go black and you should prepare yourself to repaint the night.

8. Cathedrals never bloom; they are built brick by brick by callous hands
9. A flower is only beautiful with eyes to see it. Plant your gardens in the middle of paths, and if they are trampled over, plant them again, and continue doing so until the foot traffic heeds to their beauty.

10. If you find a peach in a parking lot—eat it. If you find a rabbit on a rooftop—taker her in. If you find a vagrant living in your trunk—give him a pillow. If you find love on a ledge—tackle it.

11. Keep the illusion of time chained up in your basement, muzzle his mouth, and forget to feed him.

12. A parrot taught a few phrases is entertaining, but the bird that sings the song of his day may be heard forever.

13. Tomorrow you will be dead. It is inevitable. All that will remain is what you've left behind.

I wrote the stories in *The Real Thing* because that’s how I wanted to spend my time. Contrary to principal 11, I am fully aware of time as a limited resource. Wasting it trying to achieve so that I can do what I want, appears to me a backwards line of thought. I’d rather just do what I want to do now and continue doing so every day that I am granted.

There is so much finality that comes with a term like statement of purpose. In creative realms, we are constantly on the verge of figuring our work out, yet never land until the crank lowering our casket stops with a thud. To state a purpose would be akin to writing ones name with water on cement. *The Real*
*Thing* is my attempt to become a better writer. That is its sole purpose. Anything I ever make will be for the purpose of getting better at the craft.

I strive to matter. It’s a simple thought, but impossible to measure. The only reason I think I have a chance at writing something memorable is that I am aware of the flaws in my craft. Stating this, I am sure I remain ignorant of the whole corruption. What I recognized is my reliance on imagery and sympathy. I try to stick a character on the reader and lull their consciousness with vibrant images and lyrical construction. My conflicts are sometimes muddled and often fail to stick the landing. I confess this in the hopes that I have righted some of these wrongs in the stories that comprise *The Real Thing*.

As stated before, Sampson writes the stories while I am assigned to revise them. I see this process as mechanical work. Not in the sense of greasy hands and wrenches but work produced by a machine. I feel it’s my job to trick Sampson into motion, retrieve the first run of the product, and think it over. Revision is a delicate place, a special place, a place of pacing and oration. It’s the dirty work, the stuff that drives writers mad. It will make you feel like an idiot one moment then makes you realize yourself as the genius you are the next. Revision is what you sign up for when you want to be a writer.

**Steps to Revising**

1. Transcribe the story offered by Sampson
2. Print out the story
3. Read aloud for clarity and corrections
4. Arrange for trusted reader(s) to assess the product
5. Conceptualize additions and subtractions from work on the printed story
6. Correct transcription
7. Repeat steps 2-6 until work is ready

These are the steps that have been applied to the stories of *The Real Thing*. While the stories may be imperfect, they have been reviewed and rearranged many times. I get a twinge in my stomach when I read one of my stories as published in a literary magazine and see something that could be clearer or cut back. I can't help but correct the perceived error in the story's word document. I am comforted by the fact that Walt Whitman revised his seminal work, *Leaves of Grass*, until his death. I do not plan to apply this model of madness to *The Real Thing*, but any chance to breathe is worth taking.

I do plan to make *The Real Thing* the first of many. When working at the library I realized that there were two types of writers, the ones with one book on the shelf and the ones with the shelf to themselves. I want to be the latter. I am a decade into the journey, and only recently have I begun to attain success. Sixteen of the twenty-nine stories in *The Real Thing* have found homes in literary magazines, and though I will be the first to say that this doesn't mean much, it does say that there is an audience for my brand of fiction.
The Real Thing is for people tired of the everyday. It’s for dreamers and magic believers. It’s for people who look at the world and say, *What if.* It’s the culmination of two years’ work. It’s just the beginning.
WORKS CITED

    Print.

    Print.
APPENDIX

THE REAL THING