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# Lysley Tenorio on 'Monstress'

By [Aria Beth Sloss](#) January 31, 2012

**AT WORK**



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*I first heard of Lysley Tenorio a little more than a decade ago, when his story “Superassassin” came out in The Atlantic. “Superassassin” is the rare work that gets a child narrator right, and it features all of what I now recognize as the trademarks of Tenorio’s work: startling imagery, moments of sadness combined with gestures of heartbreaking intimacy, and an unstinting commitment to character. **Monstress**, Tenorio’s first collection, is out from Ecco this month. Characters include transsexuals, lepers, healers, and a horror-movie screenwriter named Checkers. Reading about them, you feel, as the narrator of “Felix Starro” says, “that breath of relief that there is someone in the world, finally, who understands what hurts you.”*

**There’s an emphasis in this collection on the power of imagination. The narrator of “Superassassin” is a young boy whose fantasies have started to eclipse reality, and the narrator’s teenage sister in “L’amour, CA” follows her dreams about America and love to an unhappy ending. In “Felix Starro,” the grandfather performs ritual “cleansings” for men and women who believe themselves to be truly healed. What place do you think imagination has in our lives as children and how does that change, or not, as we become adults?**

I can really only speak for myself. As a kid, I had a pretty good imagination but one that, in retrospect, was fairly systematized to the ways of the world I knew. For example, for years I had a fantasy world on the side, one in which I was a child star who had his own sitcom, was a frequent guest on talk shows, and even had a few cameos on—should I admit this?—*Dynasty*. But here was the catch—I never saw Filipinos on TV, and I couldn’t figure out what story lines for my imaginary show could possibly include a Filipino kid. My solution—in every show and movie I starred in, I was *adopted* from some never-named country. As for my celebrity life, my family was tucked away in a Hollywood compound, somehow never able to attend all those red-carpet events with me. So I had a good imagination but found myself hampered—sometimes even troubled and stressed out—by tough truths. I’d venture to say that some kids might have that same difficulty, trying to divorce certain constraints of reality from a free-for-all

These days, I can barely imagine anything beyond tomorrow, but I will say that, when it comes to my writing, I care less and less about the real world. Obviously, if I'm writing a story based on facts or historical events, I strive for accuracy, hoping that accuracy provides inherent drama. But I often feel that if the writing is good, I can get away with anything. So in a way, my imagination feels much freer now than it ever did when I was a kid.

**The narrator in “Help” has a line that struck me as something any one of your characters might have uttered. He says, “I thought leaving was a terrible thing, the saddest of acts, something you do to the people you love.” How old were you when you immigrated to the United States from the Philippines?**

I was seven months old when we left the Philippines for California, so I didn't have that first-hand experience of leaving, and losing, home. That said, I was always cognizant of the fact that my parents and older siblings left plenty behind—family, friends, high school sweethearts. The word *uwi*, which in Tagalog means “to return home,” always popped up in my parents' conversations, which, for me, gave the Philippines a kind of phantom presence in our household. Difficult and lonely as it was, I know my family, for a myriad of reasons, wanted to be here in America, but they couldn't stop calling our former country home. But perhaps that was a subconscious attempt at the impossible—occupying two places at once.

I feel as though I also live two separate lives. I grew up in San Diego, where most of my family still lives, and when I'm visiting home, I feel completely gone from my life in San Francisco, where I write, teach, try to catch up on the *New Yorker*, eat kelp noodles, drink over-priced drinks—all things that seemingly have no relationship to where and how I grew up. And when I do return to my life here in San Francisco, I always feel adrift for a few days. In San Diego, I spend most of my time with my mother—she turns seventy-eight this year—and we do things that for me provide an inexplicable comfort. We walk around Ross Dress for Less and the Dollar Tree, eat American and Filipino fast food, watch *The Golden Girls* in her bedroom late at night. And she speaks to me in her own kind of English, using

those things are so natural to me, so authentic and effortless, and I feel so removed from them when I'm back at my desk, fumbling through sentences, dialogue, plot points. I love and need both lives—the one in San Francisco, the one in San Diego—but they're forever at emotional odds.

**Later in “Help,” the narrator says, “I stayed quiet, letting everyone else remember and tell the story however they wanted.” Fiction depends on the power of exactly that—everyone telling the story however he or she wants. How do you define truth in the context of fiction?**

When asked for advice, I've heard writers say, more than a few times, “Just write the truth.” It's such a terse and blunt response, and I can't help but feel that the person asking is supposed to gasp in wonder at this answer, as if the secrets of the universe have been suddenly revealed. But I never really know what writers mean by this, so I'm glad to give it a shot. I think truth, in fiction, is the achievement of believability in the context of a specific fictional reality. Truth starts with world-building, creating not just a physical environment, but an emotional, psychological, tonal, formal, and linguistic space in which characters act against and react to other forces. And the believability of how these characters act determines truth.

For example, at the end of Annie Proulx's “Brokeback Mountain,” after Jack Twist has died, his lover, Ennis Del Mar, finds Jack's blood-stained shirt, discovering his own shirt inside it, “the pair like two skins, one inside the other, two in one.” A reader might see this as overly symbolic, perhaps even sentimental, in which case the moment isn't the truth. But to me, it's absolutely truthful, because in “Brokeback Mountain,” the love between these two men is made impossible by the world around them, so much so that they at times turn on each other. So it's completely believable that Jack would've taken his shirt, bloodied from one of their fights, and put Ennis's inside it, as a way of indulging, in the quietest, most hidden way possible, the tenderness he feels for Ennis. It feels truthful. And I think this definition of truth applies to any kind of story, regardless of the spirit in



innovations in Ander Monson’s work, the super-powered kids in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*—they all create a context where the truth of a character’s emotional experience can be determined.

As for the more literal definition—getting your facts right, knowing your history, and so on—I think it’s absolutely foolish not to indulge in the research, because you never know what missed opportunities you’ll find. It was by flipping through a biography of Imelda Marcos that I learned about the guys who beat up the Beatles at the Manila International Airport, which gave me the idea for “Help.” Material like that is pure gold. That said, I take liberties as a fiction writer, so after a certain point, factual truth goes out the window.



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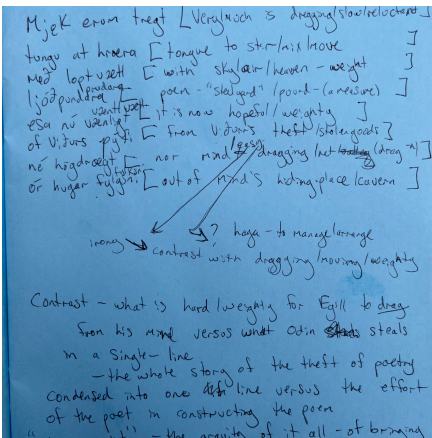
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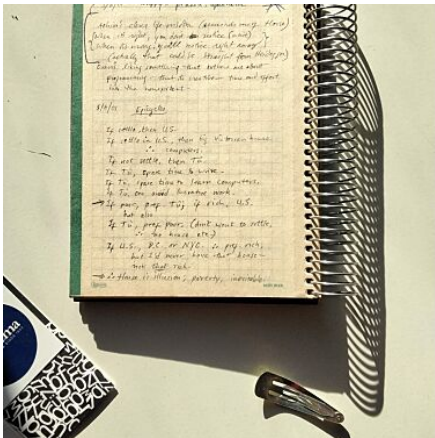
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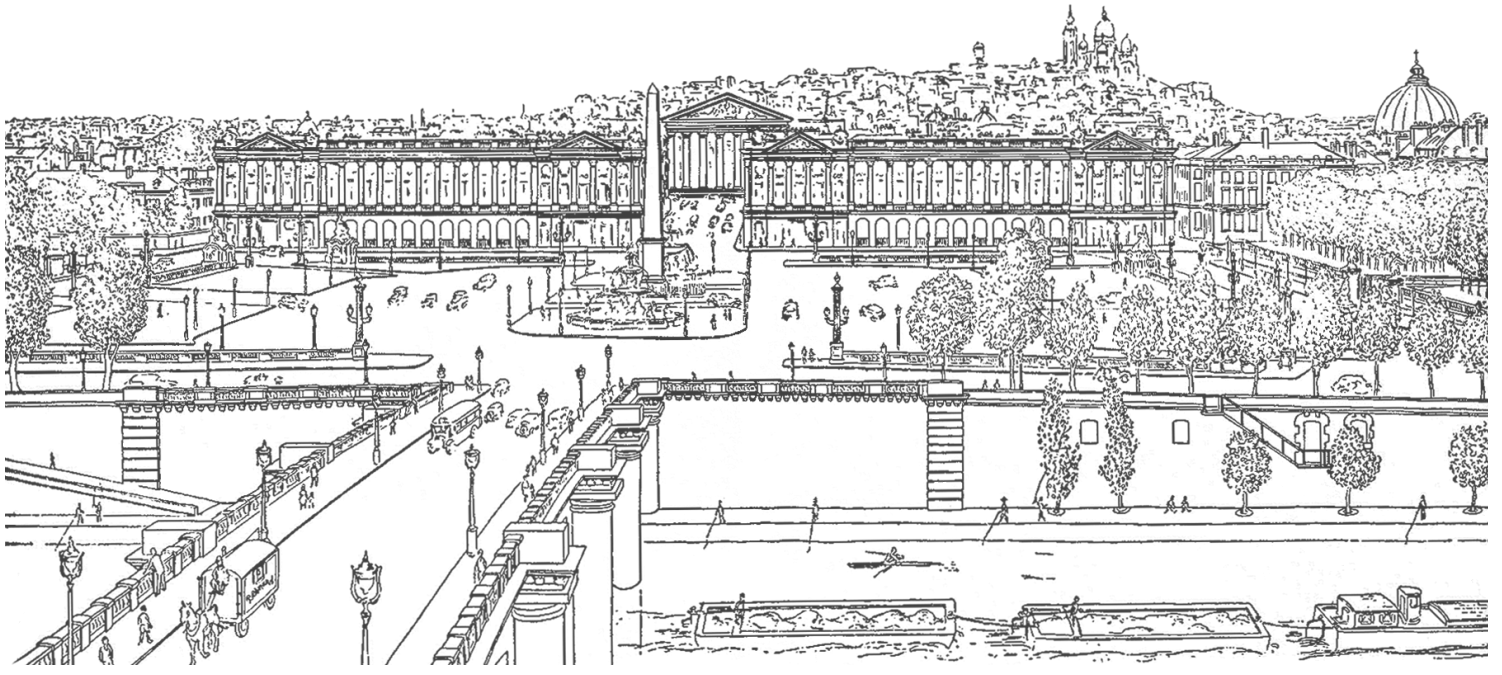
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