

More From By Heart

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BOOKS

The Hemingway Scene That Shows How Humanity Works

The novelist Téa Obreht describes how a single surprising image in *The Old Man and the Sea* sums up the main character's identity.

By Joe Fassler

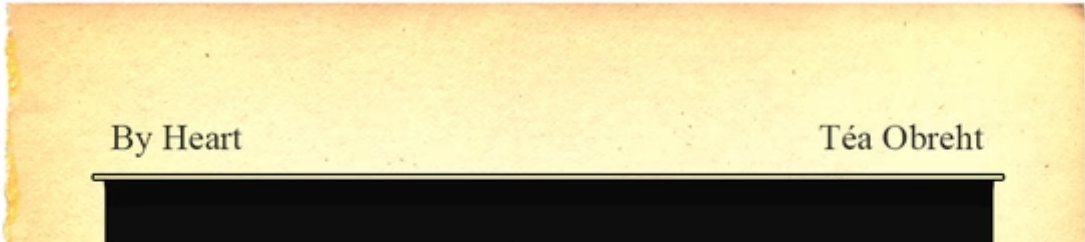
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By Heart

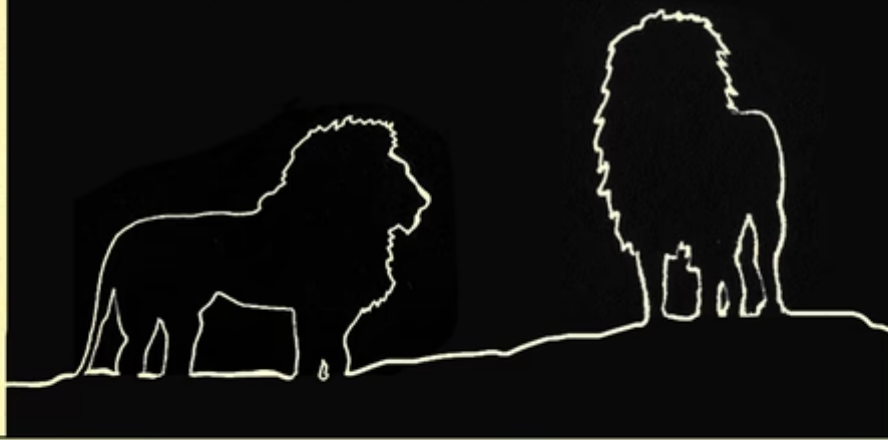
Téa Obreht

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"The old man was dreaming about the lions."

— Ernest Hemingway,
The Old Man and the Sea



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Arizona territory of the 1870s, it manages to be both deeply magical and deeply realist at the same time, combining the stories of two ghost-haunted protagonists, a fantastic beast lurking on the outskirts of a homestead, and the historical, stranger-than-fiction camel corps that once patrolled the American West. Obreht's work has appeared in such venues as *The Best American Short Stories*, *The New Yorker*, and *The*

Atlantic. She teaches at Hunter College in New York City, and spoke with me by phone.

Téa Obrecht: I read *The Old Man and the Sea* pretty early on, I think in middle school. You know how as memory distills and years go by, you just have one image that's associated with something? What I remember most from that first encounter was this strange detail of lions running on a beach. Returning to the book as an adult, that seemed to make no sense. The story has nothing to do with lions. It's a book about a fisherman and a giant marlin and this incredible battle that takes place out at sea. But the lions, who appear in this moment of interiority that's stuck with me for years, help explain one of the qualities I look for most in fiction.

The book follows a fisherman named Santiago. He's had many years of successful fishing in the Gulf Stream off the coast of Cuba, but he's an old man now and has gone 84 days without taking a fish. As the book begins, it almost feels like he's carrying around a kind of curse, and he seems utterly depleted. He has a loving relationship with a young boy who brings him coffee and newspapers, but whose parents have forbidden him to spend any more time with Santiago—encouraging him instead to spend time on a boat that is more fortuitous in its harvesting. As the old man goes out to fish one final time without the boy, the boy's care and respect for him is the only anchor the reader has to hold on to for emotional purchase.

Santiago sails farther than he's ever gone, closer to Florida than Cuba, and he catches a marlin. The two of them battle for essentially three days before he manages to kill the marlin—the biggest fish he's ever seen. In his sleeplessness and physical pain, he's deeply torn between respect and admiration for the fish and the grim inevitability of

having to defeat it. So much of the battle section is about sensory detail—descriptions of the sea, and the sun, and the pain in his hands, and the weight of the marlin. We get very, very few moments of interiority. Except one night, as Santiago falls to sleep with the fish still on the line, he dreams of lions he saw on an African beach as a young sailor. It's this weird, jarring, haunting, beautiful image.

Once Santiago has killed the marlin, he straps it to the boat and heads home. But the blood in the water attracts sharks, who eat the brilliant, beautiful fish he's suffered so much to catch. All that's left is the head and the tail. In the final scene, he arrives badly sunburned, exhausted, his hands all cut up from the rope, with his prize destroyed.

As readers, we've been close to Santiago's perspective for many pages, but in the book's final moments we pull out and spend time with other people on the beach, including his fellow fishermen, who are measuring the carcass to estimate what the great fish must have been like. Later, we pull out even further to the tourists sitting on the boardwalk, overlooking the spine and tail of the now-decapitated fish:

“What's that?” [a woman] asked a waiter and pointed to the long backbone of the great fish that was now just garbage waiting to go out with the tide.

“Tiburón,” the waiter said. “Eshark.” He was meaning to explain what had happened.

“I didn't know sharks had such handsome, beautifully formed tails.”

“I didn't either,” her male companion said.

Up the road, in his shack, the old man was sleeping again. He was still sleeping on his face and the boy was sitting by him watching him. The old man was dreaming about the lions.

The book ends there. From a craft perspective, what strikes me most is the boldness of this kind of perspective shift so late in the game, when your reader has been accustomed to one lens for so long. There's tremendous risk of creating a distancing effect. And yet somehow Hemingway manages to make the whole thing much more intimate. Because he shows you, in the briefest of maneuvers, the whole scope of how humanity works.

By the final lines, Santiago's epic battle is already being misconstrued and misunderstood. And so, as the novella ends, you sense that Santiago's story doesn't have much of a future: It's going to dissolve with the tide; it's already being carried out to sea. That's the fate of all life, and the fate of all stories. The truth of what really happened out there in the Gulf Stream belongs only to us, the readers, because we watched the old man's struggle with his fish.

But in the end, even our memories don't seem to matter. We're left with an image that seems to transcend that epic battle: the lions on the beach, which Santiago dreams of as the story closes. Somehow, these lions he glimpsed as a boy capture the essence of his humanity. They remain, even when everything else has been eroded. Even the life-changing brutality of his experience at sea can't change that.

By ending on that image, Hemingway suggests that what matters most is the preservation of a person's sense of self—which only that person can know in life, and which a reader can know through the intimacy of fiction. To a degree, you get the

whole story of the battle with the marlin in order to be able to come back to this image. It's an utterly inactive moment—Santiago is asleep, after all—and yet it reveals what his soul is all about. The lions are the door into his personhood.

One of the things that has struck me as I get older is that as more and more information fills your brain, you have less control over what you remember. Your ability to access the things that remind you of *you* becomes less reliable. It would be wonderful to have complete recall of the moments I think *should* be most meaningful to me—some great moment in my family, or the instant I met my husband, or some fantastic exchange that I had with another writer. But those memories often fray, leaving only their essence. When people do remember specifics, the sharpest, most luminous details are often strange, or surprising. We all have our lion moments.

I think that's a widely recognizable feeling, and something to which a reader can respond when establishing intimacy with a character. Being privy to something the character experiences in a moment of interiority—something that's so out of their control, they themselves aren't sure why that particular memory is surfacing, or what it means—can create a sense of deep closeness. Hemingway rejected the notion of any symbols at the heart of *The Old Man and the Sea*. His attitude was more or less, *The fish is a fish and the sea is the sea—what do you want from me?* Which is a very Hemingway thing to do and say. But part of the magic of the lions is that they escape any kind of easy symbolic interpretation. They really do feel like the kind of image that might surface organically in a mind, when you, the reader, just happened to be there to glimpse it.

I often feel it's my duty to invent these moments for my characters—memories that aren't overtly symbolic but feel essential somehow. The only way to do it is just to write into the errors.

I'm happy to make mistakes, and go the wrong route with characters, and find all these false moments just for the sheer feel of them being wrong. I can feel when it's wrong and I can't deliberately get something right.

But eventually you get there. I think cracking a character open is about coming back to that character again and again, with slightly better questions each time, until you hit the lions on the beach—if you're lucky.

There's a lot that's contentious about Hemingway, and for good reason. But whatever issue you take with him, I think *The Old Man and the Sea* is kind of unassailable, especially in its final moments. Hemingway presents a painful, unforgiving world, and yet in this last image, we're given an enduring note of meaning. It suggests that a small kernel of eternal truth burns inside us all. That reality is so convincing on the page that it seems as though Santiago's life will keep on going, even though for us, the story must end there. It's a familiar sadness, the thing that makes all partings in life meaningful: the sense that when you cease to be part of a situation—a job, a community, a relationship—you are never going to know what might have happened if you'd stayed.
