The Anthology of Babel
Ed Simon, David Ben-Merre, Julia Coursey, Claire Daigle, Stephen David Engel, Em K. Falk

Published by Punctum Books

Simon, Ed, et al.
The Anthology of Babel.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/84182

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2918107
“What Else Was There To Do?”: Fat Futurity and the Limits of Narrative Imagination in *Desolation*

*Em K. Falk*

I’ve been dead my whole life.

— Siobhan Graves¹

“Folks had a hard enough time just looking out for themselves back then. Somebody like that… well, what else was there to do?”

— *Desolation*

**Introduction**

The 2016 horror film *Desolation*² was met with a measure of critical praise upon its release. Among the film’s chief strengths, reviewers cited its reliance on atmospheric dread and narrative

---

tension rather than jump scares or blaring musical stings. As a wide-release horror film helmed by a female director, *Desolation* has received particular attention from feminist critics. *Jetsam*’s Maddie Shore compares the film to *The Babadook,* directed by Jennifer Kent.

[As with *The Babadook*], a female filmmaker presents audiences with a nightmarish story about processing trauma. In this case, the scope of that story is larger: the conflict is rooted in the collective trauma and guilt of an entire community. Traumatic events can never be undone. And so the ghosts or demons that represent the echoes of those events can never be fully exorcized.

Other writers have homed in more precisely on the source of the collective “trauma” at the heart of the narrative. Writing for the feminist magazine *RedCurrent,* Kirsten Nye-Lenehan praises the film’s “compassionate rage” on behalf of its ghostly antagonist. “When the circumstances of [the ghost’s] death are revealed, the protagonist and, by extension, the viewer are overcome with a sense of betrayal. The murder of an obese and disabled woman is portrayed not as a mercy killing but as a grave injustice.”

Still other critics take a different view of *Desolation*’s treatment of body size as a narrative device. “How could anyone call this film ‘fat positive’ when a fat character is literally the monster?” demands an anonymous contributor to the “radically fat-positive” horror blog *DEATHDRIVE.* This essay presents a simi-

---

5 Maddie Shore, “Trauma and Restless Ghosts in Jessica Shan’s *Desolation.*” *Jetsam,* December 2016, 23–24.
larly skeptical view. Despite what might be arguably termed a compassionate or pitying portrayal of the film’s primary antagonist, a fat woman is ultimately depicted as a terrifying monster. Her size is not incidental but rather crucial to the legend of how she came to haunt the town, a tale which features in the film as an embedded narrative or story-within-a-story. Furthermore, the embodiment of the villainess is thematically significant. For the protagonist and, by extension, the viewer, she represents the inevitability and permanence of death.

A general symbolic association between body size and mortality has seized the collective imagination in our age of constant, breathless anguish over the “obesity epidemic.” In popular discourse, fatness is explicitly framed in terms of its threat to the life of not only the individual but of the nation itself.8 We are desperate to avoid becoming fat ourselves, and desperate to exterminate fat people from within our midst. Cultural critic Siobhán Graves asserts that the very fattest bodies horrify us the most because in such a figure “the possibility of slenderness, which is to say the possibility of redemption and rebirth, is extinguished”9.

Interpreting Desolation through the lens suggested by Graves in her seminal 1999 book Death Becomes Me: Mortal Terror and the Spectre of Obesity, I argue that Desolation presents a well-trodden and all-too-familiar narrative about life at the upper extremes of body size— or rather, the impossibility of such a life. This seems to be the only possible or acceptable story about very fat people: namely, that fatness is associated with mortality so closely that to be very fat is to exist in a state of living death. Beyond a certain threshold a person is, as Graves puts it, “always already dead” and she is perceived to be “nothing more than a

9 Graves, Death Becomes Me, 56.
grotesque memento mori, shunned by her peers and community into a living tomb.”

As a ghost, the antagonist of Desolation is literally dead from the very beginning of the story. In a sense she was always dead because, despite the narrative’s “compassionate rage” on her behalf, no room is left to imagine a different outcome for her. As soon as she grew to an untenable size her fate was sealed. Graves calls this narrative tendency in popular portrayals of very fat people a “malign failure of imagination.” I would also describe it more precisely as the denial of fat futurity. Because she can only be thought of as dead or imminently dying, the very fat person cannot be understood as continuing to live or exist in her present physical state. Her life itself is unthinkable. Following Graves’s application of terror management theory, I posit that Desolation is a microcosmic illustration of how the terror of being or becoming fat is a direct expression of the fear of death.

American Gothic

Desolation opens with a voiceover accompanied by shadow puppet-like animation. “It all begins with a sad story,” the narrator intones. Once upon a time, the story goes, a large family lived on an isolated farmstead: two parents and their seven daughters. When a sudden illness descended on the family, all of the daughters fell ill and six of them perished.

Instead of adapting to their new existence as a family of three, the grief-stricken parents carried on as if nothing had changed, except that all of their resources were now dedicated to the remaining daughter. Each took on an impossible workload, as if they had the same number of mouths to feed. So the seventh sister was doted on and stuffed with enough food for seven people, year in and year out, until she grew too large to leave the bedroom that she and her sisters had once shared.

10 Ibid., 86.
11 Ibid., 20.
Eventually the parents simply worked themselves to death. As she tried to escape her confinement and seek help, the helpless, nameless woman knocked over a kerosene lamp. By the time neighbors arrived, they could only watch as the farmhouse burned to the ground with its occupant trapped inside. “She died screaming” says the narrator, “and we want to believe that there was no one to hear her. But maybe every legend begins with a lie.”

The narrator is revealed to be the film’s twenty-something protagonist: Shoshanna “Sho” Green. The main narrative begins as Sho leaves her Philadelphia apartment and sets out for the crumbling rural town of Desolation, Pennsylvania, where the tale of the “Seventh Sister” is part of the local folklore. Sho is the host of a popular podcast called “American Gothic,” for which she investigates and recounts urban legends and local ghost stories from across the United States. At the start of the film, the show has been on hiatus while Sho grieved the recent death of her mother. As a gesture of moving on, she sets out to gather material for the episode that will kick off a new season. While packing up her field equipment, Sho explains to her girlfriend that she is drawn to Desolation and to the Seventh Sister because the story seems to be a warning about the dangers of outsized or inappropriate grief. “If you can’t let go of something you’ve lost,” she says, “you might lose everything that you have left.”

When she arrives in the town, Sho’s first contact is Greg, a hobbyist historian. After he has retold the grim story as he understands it, along the same lines as the opening narration, Sho asks if there is any historical record of the family. Greg coughs and evenly replies “No.” When she then asks whether the story of the Seventh Sister is based on real historical events, he equivocates: “Oh sure, probably. Every legend starts with a grain of truth, doesn’t it?” After the exchange, Sho wonders aloud into her mic, “Where did this legend come from, and why has it endured? If it is not rooted in history, then from what dark corner of Desolation’s psyche did it emerge?”

In the slow build up to Desolation’s second act, Sho wanders the dusty, overgrown streets of Desolation, meditating on her
own grief and seeking out more material on the melancholy legend. The looming skeletons of rotted granaries and warehouses, stark against the gray and ochre void of the surrounding fields, provide a symbolic externalization of Sho’s own feelings of stagnation and loneliness. In voiceover, Sho records some of her own thoughts on the story of the Seventh Sister, suggesting that the mother and father in the tale “were so consumed by grief that they destroyed themselves and ultimately even their remaining daughter.” She also calls her girlfriend and muses about her own mother, about things that were said and things left unsaid. She interviews one of the town supervisors, who wonders aloud whether the legend of the Seventh Sister might be parlayed into a source of tourism. A bohemian-looking cafe owner offers a perspective on the story that re-centers the subjecthood of the Seventh Sister herself: “What did she think of all this? Losing her sisters, living with her crazy parents — imagine how lonely she was. But a woman couldn’t just leave home and live on her own in those days.”

As an externalization of the protagonist’s psyche and the collective psyche of its residents, Desolation itself projects an aura of stagnation and melancholy. In the present day, true to its name, the town is a ruin. Abandoned silos and grain elevators rise from the scrubby hills like ancient monoliths. The residents’ homes are small and stark. The main street of the town is flanked by crumbling brick buildings whose square facades evoke a row of faces fixed with a thousand-yard stare. Images of post-agricultural decay and the decrepit state of the rural working class form a hastily sketched backdrop for the main action of the film. This is a common device in American horror films: a rural setting instantly evokes a certain uncanny atmosphere, a pervasive feeling of “claustrophobic emptiness.”¹² Often, naive “city slicker” type characters are pitted against archetypal violent, animalistic “hillbillies,” as in such films as Deliverance (1972), The Hills Have Eyes (1977), Canebrake (1991), and Wrong.

---

Occasionally, the dynamic is reversed, with the rural characters occupying a more sympathetic (Pumpkinhead [1989]; Tucker & Dale vs. Evil [2010]) or heroic (Oxbow [2003]) role. Like most other horror films of this ilk, Desolation offers little in the way of meaningful class or historical analysis. While the film does not descend into the monstrous hillbilly cliché, it does rely on the image of rural decay to illustrate the general theme of mortality. It is never made clear exactly when or why the economy of the town collapsed, because such details would be incidental to the narrative. The story is not about the social plight of rural America, but about the protagonist’s confrontation with the painful reality of death.

Reviewing the film for the New York Times, Jay Orba describes the imagery and thematic undertones of Desolation as “an expression of distinctly American anxieties.” Orba’s reading of the film synthesizes its use of rural imagery with the embodiment of the Seventh Sister herself.

The quiet squalor of tumbled-down barns and rusted, overgrown farm equipment is contrasted with the more lively but equally rusty setting of Philadelphia. The visual language of the film suggests a connection between the urban and the rural environments, beyond their significance to the personal journey of Shoshanna herself. Just as the turmoil of a troubled subconscious will influence the outer realm of conscious behavior, the decay of rural life may show itself in the cracks that run across the shiny facade of its urban counterpart.

The nexus of this implied relationship might be found in the figure of the vengeful specter herself. The ghost is the troubled spirit of a woman who was abjectly obese, and the film is otherwise too introspective for this creative choice to have been a matter of cheap shock value. Indeed, the ghost seems to embody the general decay that has descended on the town and, by extension, on rural life and the soul of America itself.

13 Orba, “Desolation Is a Uniquely American Nightmare.”
For decades, family-owned farms have been in a state of steep and steady decline—a trend which seems to correspond with the explosion of obesity rates. Two thirds of American adults are overweight or obese, and economically disadvantaged communities, both urban and rural, have been hit hardest by the epidemic. One is left to wonder whether there might be a real-life connection between American obesity and the consolidation of big agribusiness and the proliferation of mass-produced, highly processed foods.\textsuperscript{14}

All this is extrapolated from a horror film that makes no direct mention or portrayal of farming at all, and that features no commentary on obesity aside from a plot predicated on the unnatural death of a very fat woman. Orba’s review and others like it speak to a powerful need to expound on the meaning of fatness where-ever it is seen, and in popular discourse that meaning is almost always death. Writing decades prior, when the rhetoric of the “obesity epidemic” had only just emerged, Graves predicted our contemporary conflation of obesity with mortality. Paraphrasing Leslie Fiedler,\textsuperscript{15} she writes that “It used to be that we could revel in our size, or fight it, or stoically endure our fate.”\textsuperscript{16} She notes that fatness, even at its most extreme, once encompassed a multitude of contradictory meanings: “Before we were consigned to ‘morbid obesity,’ people of extreme size could be marvels as well as monsters. We might inspire horror but we could also be objects of desire or of envy, heralds of joyful abandon and good fortune. We have always been a spectacle but at least we could choose our schtick.”\textsuperscript{17} But in the 1980s there came a discursive shift. Public health reports and new media began to use the language of an “obesity epidemic.”

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Graves, \textit{Death Becomes Me}, 72.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
In order to constitute an “epidemic,” fatness must be a disease. Not merely a vector for disease, or a risk factor, or a symptom, but a plague in itself. Suddenly it’s not heart disease or diabetes — actual treatable ailments — that threaten the population. “Diet or die” the media hounds us. To be or become fat is death. And what about those of us who are far beyond the reach of diets, whose size is inescapable and overwhelming? We can only be monsters now. The living dead, silenced and exiled.  

Mortal Terror

After the opening narration and the animated sequence, the film introduces Sho via her reflection as she pulls down a cloth that had been covering a mirror in her parents’ home. This shot establishes the theme and scope of the story, drawing the viewer into the interior life of the protagonist to share her grief, and her struggle to fully comprehend mortality. Uncovering the mirror is itself a gesture of renewal, a small ritual to mark the process of healing and moving on in the wake of irrevocable loss. Sho is ready to start living her life again, but there are still trials ahead.

Ghost stories are an age-old medium through which cultural communities collectively process the permanence of death and loss. Desolation is itself a ghost story within a ghost story. The first indication that the figure of the Seventh Sister is really a ghost comes during Sho’s first night in the town. She experiences a disturbing dream in which her room is engulfed in flames. As she runs for the bedroom door, someone pulls it shut from outside and turns a key in the lock. After clawing at it helplessly, she turns to the window, but it seems to shrink as she crawls toward it, until it is only a face-sized porthole. Outside, the sky is teeming with white stars, and beneath it lies a sea of wide, staring eyes. As the smoke begins to smother her, she bolts awake.

18 Ibid., 84.
Sho is ready to attribute the nightmare to her empathy for the figure of the Seventh Sister. But then she records a conversation with two young boys who provide an ominous addition to the story. “She didn’t want to die,” one of them says. His companion adds that the Seventh Sister haunts the town. “Nobody would help her, so she wants people to suffer the same way she did.” Mysterious deaths plague the town’s population, the boys tell her. Lingering deaths. Every now and then, an otherwise healthy person will slowly suffocate, coughing up “black stuff” although no foreign residue is found when the body is examined.

When Sho begins to ask adult residents about the ghost of the Seventh Sister, they become evasive and hostile. A few of them, Sho realizes, are afflicted with a wracking, wheezing cough. One man becomes so enraged, apparently out of mortal fear for his family, that he nearly attacks Sho and chases her away from his property.

Running into the woods, Sho loses her bearings and stumbles onto the overgrown and obscured, but distinctly charred, foundation of a farmhouse. In a nearby clearing she makes another chilling discovery: a row of six headstones. The weathered grave markers are inscribed with lurid puritanical names: Difficulty, Dependence, Damnation, Devotion, Discernment, and Despair. Confusion and then realization play out across Sho’s face as she imagines the name of the missing seventh sister. Surely her name would also have begun with D—and can it really be a coincidence that the town is called Desolation? But why would the town be named after the Seventh Sister? And why is her name left out of the story?

Gaining access to the town’s archives, Sho rifles through death certificates and confirms that an uncanny number of deaths throughout the town’s history have been attributed to unknown causes or to nameless respiratory distress. There are indeed no historical records of the destroyed farmstead or its inhabitants. But Sho manages to prise open a locked cabinet deep in the recesses of the archives, uncovering a diary dated to the 1820s. Inside, she uncovers the terrible truth about the
shame that haunts the town, and about the motivation of the vengeful ghost.

The diary’s author is a man who was present when the farmhouse burned down. But he did not ride out one night in response to a blaze that was already burning. A voiceover and accompanying flashback reveal the true sequence of events, with the initial shadow puppet-esque forms giving way to actual shadows cast by real people. Accompanied by a small group of neighbors, the diary’s author set out to investigate the farm because it had been some weeks since anyone had seen or heard from its inhabitants. The party found that the house was dark, but when they pounded on the door they could hear a voice inside. Upon entering, they encountered two corpses, along with the foul stench of corruption and excrement. The feeble voice beckoned us further, into one of the bedrooms, and there we were met with a hideous sight. A woman was lying on the floor, covered in her own making and filth. She was so monstrously corpulent that she could not rise, but made a grotesque effort to crawl toward us. She begged our help, and called herself Desolat...
killing, demanding “what else was there to do?” about a person as physically dependent and unmanageable as Desolation.

Sho passionately pleads that they must “make it right.” As she tries to convince them, she begins to gasp and cough. When she sees that her palm is streaked with black, she realizes that she has become fully enmeshed in the drama of the town. She too is responsible for whatever atonement might lay the ghost to rest. Before her eyes the people around her begin to choke and clutch their chests, falling to the ground one by one as Desolation exacts her revenge. This leaves Sho as the only person who can confront the angry spirit.

Returning to the site of the ruined farmstead, Sho constructs a makeshift headstone, carefully inscribing it with “Desolation” and placing it beside the other six. As she tries to leave, the foundation splits with an apocalyptic crack, yawning to reveal a gash in the landscape full of smoke and ash, as if the very heart of the town were rotted and hollow. With an echoing crack, the sky snaps from grayish daylight into a black void glittering with stars. One by one, the stars are extinguished as Desolation herself coalesces from the darkness, manifesting as a monstrous spectre shrouded in billowing smoke. In the climactic showdown, Sho is physically helpless. But just as she is about to succumb, she engages with the onslaught on the ghost’s level, in the realm of emotion and will. “I’m so sorry,” she says, “but there is nothing else that I can do.” The words fall with the weight of Sho’s conviction: she really believes, finally, that she has done all that she can. The ghost, a manifestation of rage and guilt, loses her destructive power, and Sho is able to escape. Thrusting the fateful diary into the hands of one of the young boys from the previous scene, she drives away from the town, back to her own life.

Death is permanent, and the dead are beyond our reach or help. Just as Sho can never speak to her mother again, neither can she undo the terror and injustice that were inflicted on Desolation. This is the realization that empowers her to overcome her own guilt and thereby resist Desolation’s wrath. Crucially, Desolation is not “laid to rest” — that is impossible, precisely because her death itself can never be undone. Ghosts resist ex-
orcism not only because they remind us that death is inevitable and permanent, but because they are the lingering echoes of trauma. Sho herself is able to move on because she truly accepts that the dead are beyond her help or hinderance. However, she does undertake due diligence to ensure that Desolation’s fate is not forgotten. In the last scene of the film, she sets up her microphone again and begins to speak the lines that the audience will recognize as the film’s opening monologue.

The film employs fatness as a device to convey its narrative about death, and in so doing it relies on an already well-established system of meanings. Fatness directly signifies death, particularly the kind or degree of fatness that, as Graves puts it, “strains the bounds of both physical and psychic space.”

In plainer language, she explains that

If you are so fat that your mobility is impaired, or you cannot fit into a bus seat, or you break a chair, you are instantly regarded as a monster, a harbinger of death. Because your very presence reminds other people of their own fragile bodies, which may — which will — break down and become disabled themselves; and which will one day dissolve back into the mud.

Graves appeals to terror management theory, a social psychological framework first developed in the 1980s, to explain the mechanism by which individuals are enculturated with the fear and hatred of fatness. Very young children have no concept yet of mortality, but they are conditioned to seek security and to avoid uncertainty and vulnerability. As they get older, they come to internalize the fact that vulnerability implies the threat of death.

20 Graves, Death Becomes Me, 20.
21 Ibid., 84–85.
Adherence to parental values—“being good” in the eyes of the parental figure—is associated with feelings of safety, while transgressions that tempt parental wrath are associated with the threat of punishment and abandonment. As the individual matures and takes their place in the larger community, this relationship with the parent is transmuted into a relationship with moral and cultural authority in general.

We live in a culture where fatness represents a definite transgression. The discourse around childhood obesity ensures that children’s bodies are highly scrutinized and children are socialized to be afraid of becoming fat. As people get older and become adults, the authority figures whom they associate with safety and stability are no longer (only) their parents, but also God, the state, the medical establishment, et cetera. From earliest childhood, people are bombarded from all sides with the message that fatness will result in social and literal death.

No Future

Commenting on horror films, Graves writes:

The horror genre contains plenty of fat bodies. Yet I am surprised by the lack of horror films that rely specifically on the existential threat of being or becoming fat. Perhaps it is that our collective terror is too great to express, or so obvious and ubiquitous that any portrayal of it must already be a parody.23

The “threat of being or becoming fat” does not feature directly in the plot of Desolation. But the circumstances and manner of the title character’s death do obliquely evoke that threat. Desolation dies because she is fat. In fact, those are the only things that we know for certain about Desolation as a character: she is very fat, and because of that she dies. For all the protagonist or the audience knows, the folkloric version of her story may be mostly fabrication. Her story is not about grief, it is about the specific

23 Graves, Death Becomes Me, 113.
inevitability of her own death. She has reached a physiological point at which Graves would say that she has “become the very embodiment of death.” For her, “death is so total that even while [she] lives, life is an impossibility. This is that malign failure of imagination which makes it impossible for society to envision a livable future for us.”  

“What else was there to do?” demands the judge. How could isolated farmers in the 1820s be expected to take care of “somebody like that?” The film never explicitly addresses these questions. The implicit responses, within this film and throughout the general discourse in which the film is embedded, are Nothing and They couldn’t. Desolation’s death may have been cruel, it may have been unjust, it may have been reprehensible. But it was inevitable, because the film fails to imagine any alternative. Because of her size, Desolation is denied the very possibility of a future.

Graves is apt in calling this denial of fat futurity “malign.” Stories have tremendous social power; we rely on them to help us envision what is possible and what is right. While Desolation may evince rage and pity on behalf of its antagonist, it perpetuates the attitude that very fat people, even if they deserve our sympathy, simply cannot live in the world. They must cease to exist, either by miraculously becoming thin or acceptably fat, or by dying.

Of course it is not literally true that very fat people cannot exist. They obviously do exist, and do go about their lives. And the malignancy of our stunted imagination lies within the space of that contradiction: An entire population is excluded from full participation in community life, because this group is perceived to be dead or always imminently dying, and public spaces — both physical and social — are designed for the living.

Fiction is hardly the answer to real-life social problems. But fiction does shape our collective imagination and our understanding of what is possible. In real life, death is permanent. But

24 Ibid, 179.
in fiction the ghost’s story can be re-written. Resurrect the restless undead, give her a voice and a future. Let her live.
Bibliography


