

WEEDS

by

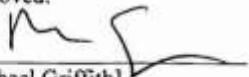
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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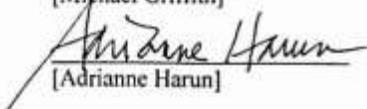
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ABSTRACT

Weeds is an eclectic collection of first stories, a kind of sampler like the old-fashioned flower-bordered alphabets young women once embroidered as demonstrations of their needlework. The present sampler, however, is festooned with unpretty things: cobwebby attics, deathbeds, and invasive insects, to name a few. These stories examine the challenge of inhabiting a human body, the quiet ferocity of the domestic environment, and the redemptive potential of sickness, death, and storytelling. Greek and Arthurian mythos and modern Hispanic (particularly Latin American) fiction are their warp and woof.

Weeds, *The Little Ones*, *The Language of the Lord*, and *The Spider and the Butterfly* are examples of magic realism, in which real-seeming characters experience and remember the world as they need to, unburdened by mundane physical limitations. The purely speculative stories—*Where There's a Will*, *Myrmecology*, and *Death Manual*—take on big trouble like dismemberment, environmental devastation and zombies to put greater pressure on the characters' humanity and valor. In the realistic tales—*The Bridge*, *A Necessary Assumption*, *The Backpack*—characters focus their gazes on ordinary objects and familiar landscapes in a search for solutions to personal frustrations and problematic relationships.

First-person narration invites the reader's complicity in the characters' most intimate moments and forces the reader to inhabit uncomfortable bodies. *The Little Ones*, an homage to Paraguayan short story master Horacio Quiroga, is a personal journal that tracks the disintegration of a mind infuriated by change. *Where There's a Will* asks the reader to experience living as a "decorpitated" head who's fighting for her life and marriage while facing exploitation and sexual harassment. In *Weeds*, a girl survives her fraught passage into puberty thanks to a talent for magical

thinking and using legends as dragomen to interpret her parents' breakup and the sudden appearance of three mysterious white hairs.

Ordinary places and objects wield extraordinary power. With the aid of a handy domestic appliance, a wife prevents her husband's retirement from ruining her perfect relationship with their house. In *The Language of the Lord*, a supermarket becomes a Borgesian labyrinth where a widow has a last chance to get some satisfaction and come to peace with disappointments. In *The Backpack*, a woman worn down by caregiving achieves a different liberation than she'd imagined through her obsession with some old camping equipment and a stranger she meets only in her dreams.

Words are magical instruments of salvation; listening is the necessary complement to telling. *The Spider and the Butterfly* is an askew love story; the modular structure and alternating first-person and third-person narration provide a dimensional view of Mother, a controlling matriarch who even as a ghostly presence exerts her power over Livy, Doctor, and Norma. The broken fourth wall in Livy's sections invites the reader into the family circle to play a role in alleviating Livy's fear of dying alone. In *Myrmecology*, a deep-earth miner becomes obsessed with a colony of ants while failing to act to save his marriage or town until, at the crucial moment, a few syllables awaken him to his humanity. Finally, in *Death Manual*, humor and tragedy mix when a man rises from the dead and makes a terrible mess of things until his daughter breaks with family tradition and says the words he needs to hear.