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A Bed of Nails

Ron Tanner
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With cover art representing twisted, piercing fish hooks, this collection of thirteen short stories seems to promise sharp menace and pain. What arises through the movement of the collection, however, is a striking portrait of survival in the face of an overwhelming world. The characters who people these stories are always just barely in control, yet somehow they manage to remain afloat in the flotsam of their lives.

This collection was selected by Janet Burroway for the G.S. Sharat Chandra Prize for Short Fiction. The author's stories have appeared in such magazines as The Iowa Review and The Massachusetts Review, and have garnered awards including a Pushcart Prize. He chairs the Communication Department at Loyola College in Baltimore. This is his first book.

One of the more remarkable aspects of Tanner's style is his subtle handling of wrenching emotions. In "Still Life," a sixty-seven-year-old man poses as a nude model for a class of college painters, as he struggles to cope with his wife's death. Suddenly, it starts hailing and the students become concerned that the skylight won't hold. Tanner manages to take the near-cliché of shattered glass as a stand-in for a traumatic event and reinvest it with its original frightening beauty.

The collection's last story, "The Day His Wife's Face Froze," encapsulates the main driving forces of the entire collection. In it, a husband is forced to confront what his wife's Bell's Palsy may portent. The story is filled with a sense of isolation. It is up to the individual to make sense of what is given. During an art project with his sixth graders, the husband has made a mask of Fate's face. It frightens the children and later he wonders what someone would think looking at it: "What could have possessed the maker to create such a face, that drowsy right side, that odd half-smile?" With that question, the collection ends, mirroring perfectly the faces of all of the characters who find themselves pulled between conflicting emotions and situations, as all the while they forge ahead, attempting to smile.

This is a surprisingly strong first collection. Tanner's subject matter is explored with compassion and an unwavering eye. He falters only in some of his last lines, where he seems to try too hard to underline the story's point. However, these are mere hiccups in an otherwise confident voice. Overwhelmingly, the stories drive forward, striking a realistic balance between hope and despair, beautifully elucidating that fact that, though fractured, people can still stand.

NAOMI MILLÁN (January / February 2004)

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