

A Different Bed Every Time

Jac Jemc

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Jemc probes the inner lives of individuals with compact, powerful, and insightful stories in this collection.

Jac Jemc's first novel, *My Only Wife*, was a finalist for the 2013 PEN/Bingham Prize for Debut Fiction, and Jemc serves as web fiction editor for *Hobart* and poetry editor at *decomp*. The latter occupation is especially enlightening in appreciating Jemc's writing in *A Different Bed Every Time*, because the words she chooses in these stories stand out, carefully chosen for their weight, sound, and impact. She juxtaposes words that might first seem to have no business together but that, once combined under her artist's eye, create new ways of realizing a familiar image. When a woman reluctantly leaves after visiting her child's father in prison, the moment is described with "The ragged engine of my tears starts up," and "A blue fever of sadness slugs through."

Jemc's stories grab the reader's attention from the first line, often a surprising, mysterious, or otherwise intriguing entry to a world soon steadily and assuredly filled out to whatever level of detail Jemc desires. Some stories run only a page or two, vignettes that put us deep into the heads of her characters; others are more traditional in their narrative form. But all are written with such care and attention that readers will find novel metaphors and vivid imagery on nearly every page.

Jemc's descriptions are needle-sharp and penetrating, as when she describes a woman in a diner on a sort-of date with a man she's not sure about, in "The Tackiness of Souls": "Daniel pays the bill while she runs into the bathroom. A moment later, she looks at her bright face in the fluorescent mirror. She smiles, exaggerated and toothy, and then her face unfolds itself into blankness."

Jemc packs a wallop emotional punch into every page, the result being that even the brief profile of a girl in the foster-care system in "Marbles Loosed" is affecting while avoiding outright sentimentality.

There are satisfying variations of tense and person in these stories; the book's sole fault, if it could be called that, is that Jemc requires that the reader read with close attention, meeting the demands of her exquisite but challenging prose. These are stories meant to be reread and slowly absorbed into the skin of the reader. With *A Different Bed Every Time*, Jemc has proven that the potential recognized in her novel extends to the genre of the short story as well.

PETER DABBENE (Fall 2014)

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