

Dancing at the Gold Monkey

Allen Learst

Leapfrog Press (October 2012)

Unknown \$14.95 (130pp)

978-1-935248-29-3

“It didn’t matter to Ray if they were for or against the war. He just couldn’t take listening to someone who hadn’t been there. They didn’t belong to the same fraternity, the one that had taken his youth and made him bitter before he was old enough to legally drink.” Ray is one of five Vietnam vets trying to acclimate to life at home in Allen Learst’s haunting collection of linked stories, *Dancing at the Gold Monkey*.

Though the flashbacks rumble throughout Vietnam—from the eerie quiet of mass graves to doped-up laughter at a bunker in the Central Highland Mountains to the blue green waters of the South China Sea, where the body of a downed naval pilot is discovered—many of these stories are set in postwar Detroit. Characters wander by lakes, down city streets, and in a variety of grubby neighborhood bars. With guns. There are always guns.

The Golden Monkey is a bar where weary women dance for dollars and men, stooped by the weight of their experiences, go to forget. Here, one man loses what little he had left from his stolen youth in “Shadowboxing.” His adult son goes to the very same place to reconnect with him in “Snakes and Dragons.”

Ma’s Pool Hall, run by a woman who literally took on the weight of her grief after her love never returned from World War II, is where the one-armed Kodoski goes hunting for a friend and ends up kissing Ma, the largest woman he has ever seen, in “A Kiss.”

Each of these stories contributes to a larger whole, an understanding of a community and the men and women trying to make their way within it. These men spend their lives stumbling from women, whiskey, and each other. Learst writes of them with both clarity and compassion: “You can’t sleep with your best friend’s wife and not feel anything, even when his wife’s left him and she wants to sleep with you. You can’t, but you do. You know there’s no wisdom in this.”

Dancing at the Gold Monkey, winner of the 2011 Leapfrog Fiction Contest, is short enough to be read in one sitting, but that doesn’t, by any stretch, make these characters and their lives forgettable. Allen Learst, a Vietnam veteran, is now a senior lecturer at the University of Wisconsin.

HOPE MILLS (Fall 2012)

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