

Dog Boy and Other Harrowing Tales

Erica-Lynn Huberty

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Erica-Lynn Huberty's idiosyncratic narrators add a luminescent quality to the gothic tales they tell. Her meticulous attention to the unique sensibilities of time stamps her plots, drawing the reader into unexpected contemplation of the shape of an era. In "Dog Boy," the collection's titular piece, Seamus Gideon recounts how he "unintentionally" murdered a man during an act of sabotage against the Vietnam War. Speaking from 1988, he details the monotonous "perdition" of his long prison sentence. The story becomes ominous when inmates unknowingly train attack dogs to hunt themselves for the amusement of their wardens: "We had become the kind of entertainment, I thought, only a Roman could love; and I guess you could say I sensed a tension among the dogs that told me it was more than hide and seek going down." As events unfold, Seamus displays a complex moral compass that attempts to reconcile his obvious helplessness with the ways his very presence renders him complicit in the atrocities he recounts.

Set on the cusp of 1919, "In Blackbrooke Hall" includes all the haunting atmospherics of classic gothic tales. When a group of young socialites visits an old mansion on New Year's Eve, they encounter an unsettling butler, eerie sounds, and a truly satisfying horror. Locked doors on long hallways are only part of their harrowing night, and devotees of the genre will revel in the story's climax, which includes a child's corpse stuffed up a chimney and grotesquerie aplenty.

"Forever Jim" is set in 1968, a familiar moment of cultural transition. Nanette makes her home in an historic Parisian cemetery. Sheltering from the cold in the tombs of luminaries such as Chopin and Seurat, she is irritated by the stream of fans at the new grave of a famous musician. Unmoved by their devotion, she notes, "his piano...did not fill my father's living room." Quality is no longer a prerequisite of fame, and for this moment at least, readers will mourn with her.

Another meditation on loss, "The Black Cat," details Sarah's decision to euthanize Pluto, her diabetic cat. Her wrenching choice will resonate with pet lovers, but her devotion extends morbidly through the frozen turf and Pluto's ornate coffin, and the events following his burial confirms the suspicion pet lovers harbor towards those whose "childhood emptiness" was never assuaged by four-legged companions. This story's conclusion affirms that gothic sensibilities lurk beneath the surface of everyday life.

Dog Boy is Huberty's first full volume. Her short fiction has appeared in numerous newspapers, literary magazines, and anthologies.

ELIZABETH BREAU (December 21, 2010)

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