

Dragon Palace

Hiromi Kawakami

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In Hiromi Kawakami's short story collection *Dragon Palace*, bizarre encounters guide lonely people onto new paths.

In these stories, troubled lives are forever changed by supernatural forces. One man claims that he was once an octopus; a mole gives dispirited humans safe haven until they can rejoin the real world. Such strange beings either provide guidance to regular people or require assistance themselves to move past their traumas.

Each character is found in an extraordinary situation: praying to a three-faced kitchen god, falling in love with an ancestor, or being raised by seven sisters who each have their own powers and goals. Some suffer from nothing worse than ennui, while others, like the main character of "Sea Horse," have suffered many years of abuse and torment. What links them all is a sense of not belonging—the idea that they should be anywhere else but where they are.

Food plays an important role in several stories: a housewife's oracular great-grandmother devours pork cutlets in "Dragon Palace," and the self-proclaimed former octopus makes his reluctant host buy him squid in "Hokusai." Such ordinary meals throw the unusual aspects of these encounters into sharper relief. And the stories are often set in a rough approximation of the "real" world, making the exotic, spectacular locales of "Mole" and "The Roar" stand out all the more.

The stories' endings are often ambiguous: the characters have been changed by their experiences, but only they know for sure what the effects will be. Whether they long for a home they have long been denied or a new start in an unknown destination, they have been granted a chance and must make the most of it.

Unique and attention-grabbing, *Dragon Palace* is a collection of open-ended fantasy tales about thwarted love and lost opportunities.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (September / October 2023)

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