

Droll Tales

Iris Smyles

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The connected stories in Iris Smyles's *Droll Tales* are innovative—filled with surrealistic imagery, dark comedy, and people unmoored in their lives.

A young woman who believes that she will never find someone to whom she would give a plane's oxygen mask to first begins a career as a living statue, recreating great works of art. She gives herself wholly to the enterprise—and to one of the people she meets along the way. Elsewhere, a bad fifth-grade break-up is explained through a diagrammed sentence—perhaps the ultimate meta breakdown—and, in a first, the work of Stéphane Mallarmé is translated into pig Latin.

"Exquisite Bachelor" plays with the ridiculousness of dating shows: René Magritte, Andre Breton, Salvador Dali, and Man Ray are among those who vie (sort of) to win the coveted rose. The story ups the ante: the contestants (all surrealists) save Fred, a "part-time personal trainer and children's party magician from Texas." In another story, a blocked poet becomes an art sensation after over-committing to DIY furniture instruction sets.

The characters are a creative lot. They encounter ridiculous external conflicts and fully embrace them. Their conversations, while often surreal and occasionally nonsensical, are nevertheless erudite and witty, full of references to art and history. Two characters, lost after having finished college, joke with each other, and with an increasing sense of gallows humor, that they will be celebrities or the president, just until they get back on their feet. Veins of irony run thick throughout the text.

Slick and self-assured, the stories of *Droll Tales* balance the surreal and the fantastical with the vulnerability of a generation now through with college and at a loss as to what to do next.

CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (July / August 2022)

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