

## Goodnight Nobody

**Ethel Rohan**

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*These stories are mystifying, mesmerizing, smart, and seductive.*

This smallish-looking collection might appear to be of little consequence—the entire book is only about 130 pages—but don't be fooled. Ethel Rohan's thirty short fictions burst large and bright, brilliantly dazzling long after they appear to have ended.

The temptation in *Goodnight Nobody* is to read from front to back, and in one sitting, and why not? Three stories run under five hundred words, several others top out at about a thousand, and the lengthiest piece isn't quite twelve pages.

Rohan keeps us dialed in to the plights of all humanity. Primarily set in Ireland, these stories really are about all of us, everywhere: those who hope and those who despair. Sometimes, it's hard to tell which we are, or why. Likewise, it's not always clear what Rohan wants us to feel about or for her characters, but she leaves room between the lines for us to decide on our own.

In "The Defiance of Gravity," a young, brain-injured woman delights in all manner of flight; she even fights the urge to jump out of a plane and into the sky, "annoyed at life's limits." Her mother, though, remains distraught, lamenting what her daughter no longer *is*. "She [the daughter] twirls above the rush of water and inside the cool of clouds, gravity as good as gone." And, "She stands at the mouth of the heavens, gravity gripping her heels." So, just who's the "victim" here?

Rohan doesn't concern herself with matters easily resolved. In the title story, "Goodnight Nobody," a garbage man is the metaphoric everyman. His life already shattered by his wife's death twenty-two months earlier, he discovers a body in a dumpster. "What becomes of the dead that no one claims?" he asks. The moon's reflection appears in an apartment window; by tilting his head, he makes a second moon appear; a few inches more, a third moon. He'd fallen in love with his wife in kindergarten as she pored over the book, *Goodnight Moon*. But, then, "He didn't believe in anything after death." What are we to make of *that*?

These stories are mystifying, mesmerizing, smart, and seductive; the language, poetic and practically song-like in places. Not since James Joyce introduced us to those other Dubliners have we ever met such an unforgettable lot as Ethel Rohan has gathered here.

CHRIS HENNING (November 30, 2013)

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