



## ★ Heartland Calamitous

### Michael Credico

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In his compelling collection of stories—most only a few pages long—Michael Credico marshals bold, creative images to depict a grim Midwest dominated by slaughterhouses and fast food restaurants. While not much happens and characters see little hope of redemption, this absurdist fiction shimmers with startling glimpses of people at the margins who confront their limitations.

Despite the book's dark themes—"It was the heartland, and winter was always coming"—the text engages the empathy and intellect. Its stories shift fluidly between the real and the surreal, pushing audiences to puzzle out their meanings: of a baby caught in the glue trap, a mother who sleeps with tigers, a man navigating a ghost town on a too-tall horse, and shapeshifting women who (almost inevitably) become fish. Rarely have bleak, "dead-end" lives been described with such boundless imagination.

In "Killing Square," a worker at a slaughterhouse is inexplicably promoted to an "inside" job and stumbles through his new responsibilities while caring for his dying father. His coworkers' indifferent slaughter of the animals serves as an aching metaphor for the struggle of both the man and his father. In "Pines," a boy is devoured by and becomes a bear; in high school, he struggles to make eye contact and viciously bites at his claws, "scared and unsure." In "Postwar: Lake Michigan," a man considers the parallels between a plane that crashed in Lake Michigan and his wife's cancer diagnosis:

*One of the would-be rescuers keeps looking at the sky. I wonder if we have the same lonely feeling, if we're thinking what the pilot thought when he set the throttle to full.*

Echoing the work of Franz Kafka and Joseph Heller, the intense, slippery images animating these powerful stories bring to life alienated characters and are challenging and surprising at every turn.

KRISTEN RABE (January / February 2020)

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