ForeWord Reviews

ESSAYS

Inscriptions for Headstones
Matthew Vollmer
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Here is written a review of a book narrow, but deep, and although described as essays, actually containing a group of creative short stories, each a one-sentence wrap-up of a life, as if inscribed upon a headstone, and these inscriptions are generally only a few pages long, focusing on a defining incident, often in the deceased's childhood, or a critical relationship, in which case sometimes the story turns out to be more about the other person than the deceased, the author taking the crucial incident or relationship and riffing in a stream-of-consciousness sort of way, often dreamlike and nostalgic for a once-lived life, like the man who awaits his children at the bus stop and imagines a day beyond his death when some stranger will see his face in a picture and think "look how happy he was, look how utterly unaware he seemed to be of his own inevitable demise" and yet the man is actually happy and at the same time aware of that inescapable fate; and some of the deceased fear God, although many are skeptical—like the man who survived a car accident and imagined an angel reaching down to save him, then wrote an article about it, but felt like a phony as he wondered "about rapists and predators and warmongers and directors of genocide who'd unleashed their wrath upon the innocent where had their guardian angels been"—and many are haunted by feelings of guilt and doom, but still the tone of the inscriptions is elegiac and poetic and punctuated by occasional social commentary, and the trope of relating a story and calling the protagonist the deceased throughout highlights one's own sense of the ending for which we are all headed and causes one to wonder, what is our defining incident, sometimes merely a quirk of personality, that drives our lives and is there still time, now, to change it before author Matthew Vollmer, author of *Future Missionaries of America* (2010) and co-editor of *Fakes: An Anthology of Pseudo-Interviews, Faux-Lectures, Quasi-Letters, "Found" Texts, and Other Fraudulent Artifacts* (2012) has a chance to write our inscriptions?

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