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Foreword Review TRANSLATIONS

Land of Smoke

Sara Gallardo
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Illusions and ghosts populate Sara Gallardo's stories, collected here in *Land of Smoke*. These are tales in which a dream come true—a cozy retirement among the flowers; the ability to fly—is apt to quickly become nightmarish, and in which the connections that people yearn for most, when realized, often lead to their quick undoing.

Atmospheric details capture ice floes, desolate caves, and plains over which the wind whips and bites; the specter of the familiar slopes through scenes that seem ordinary at first glance but that then prove to be darker, edgier, and more expansive than expected. Gallardo's human characters are at their most vivacious when they tend to their animal sides, and her animals have rich lives and needs that become a cellular-memory pulse across generations. Monsters may appear but then prove to be benign—it's the quiet ones that you have to watch out for.

Stories vary in length. Some are microfiction; some wind on through many pages. "Things Happen" is a surrealistic standout that becomes both more uncanny and more sympathetic as it progresses; tales like "Even" and "That One" manage their horrors and fairy tales in under a page. Some stories, like "Cristóbal the Giant," are imaginative etiologies that locate the nexus of natural beauty in deep, visceral need; others, like "Georgette and the General," are entirely, achingly human.

Characterizations play upon darkness and desire. One man coldly kills others to get even with life; a husband laments a missed opportunity to murder his wife; a killer gleefully hides among those sent to catch him; a mother freely admits that she loves two of her children best. Redemption may have a religious edge, but that's often more about convenience than actual belief. At all turns, these stories are unsettling, surprising, and unmissable. *Land of Smoke* is a bountiful collection of short stories, full of sharp edges, odd magic, and unexpected allure.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (July/August 2018)

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