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FOREWORD REVIEW ♥♥♥♥♥ SHORT STORIES

Little Raw Souls

Steven Schwartz
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The characters in Steven Schwartz's expertly rendered stories want more from life than what they have. Patrick, the failed novelist turned dental salesman in "Blockage," envies his ex-girlfriend, Luciana, with her "sun-drenched Mediterranean skin and full valentine lips," whose first novel has been translated into twelve languages. Elaine, in "Stranger," waiting to catch a flight home after her father's death, wants (or thinks she wants) an alcohol-induced dalliance with a man she meets in the airport bar.

In the harrowing longer story, "Indie," Mr. Adams, a high-school teacher at the end of his tether, has abandoned all hope of getting what he wants. He stands in front of his class holding a .44 caliber Colt black powder revolver to his head: "He'd initially planned to carry out the task after school … Drive to the lake or to an isolated and wooded area in the foothills. But he knew that would entail a search for a missing person, and although he had been missing from himself for some time, he didn't wish to be officially designated as such and cause Margaret the extra hardship of agonizing over his whereabouts before his body was found."

Steven Schwartz teaches creative writing at Colorado State University and has authored two short story collections, *To Leningrad in Winter* and *Lives of the Fathers*, as well as two novels, *Therapy* and *A Good Doctor's Son* . Throughout his work, he demonstrates a keen understanding of the obstacles to happiness we all encounter in our everyday lives and deftly reveals our "little raw souls" with both comedy and pathos.

In "Seeing Miles," David reunites with his cousin Mimi, the object of a childhood crush ("It was his first experience of painful desire, a fervor that threatened to swallow his flesh"), only to find that Mimi has become Miles, who teases him with "transgender schtick." A more frightening obstacle is the multiple sclerosis Everett lives with in "The Opposite Ends of the World," while also coping with his wife's desire for a baby and a neighbor with hypersensitive hearing, who objects to the behavior of his two Labrador retrievers.

Patrick, the frustrated writer in "Blockage," has more than envy to deal with. As he discovers late in the story, his wife, Connie, has been secretly writing a novel of her own—and succeeding in her quest. "That's what he'd always wanted from the writing, and that's what he saw in Connie's face tonight, transcendence. She had the glow and the certainty. That's all he had ever desired: the knowing." In the end, Patrick will experience a type of knowing, just not the type he'd expected.

Things happen in Schwartz's stories: People live and die, fall in and out of love, come to terms with unforeseen challenges. And who can resist a writer capable of sentences like this one: "The van's tires were bald and its grill had picked up a couple of tumbleweeds and was chewing on them like too much spaghetti in a child's mouth."
LEE POLEVOI (February 26, 2013)

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