ForeWord Reviews

SHORT STORIES

Love Is Power, or Something Like That
A. Igoni Barrett
Graywolf Press
978-1-55597-640-8
(May 7, 2013)

Short story collection offers up a cast of diverse, unique, and misunderstood characters each struggling with the consequences of misguided love.

The epigraph for A. Igoni Barrett's first story collection, *Love is Power, or Something Like That*, was written miles away from his Nigerian homeland, the setting for many of these stories. But Annie Proulx's words in her novel *The Shipping News* provide the perfect prelude and hint at the universal frustration soon to be unveiled: "And it may be that love sometimes occurs without pain or misery."

Power twists it. In the title story, a policeman carries the brutal authority of his uniform—both on duty and off. His wife has scars to prove it, and he has the shame: "The scar beneath her elbow where bone had torn through skin, caught his eye. He averted his gaze."

Lust disfigures it. "He began to love her when she was nine and had breasts the size of tangerines." "He" is her cousin, fifteen years older than "The Little Girl with Budding Breasts and a Bubblegum Laugh."

Misunderstanding chokes it. The marriage in "Godspeed and Perpetua" does not begin with love. A child is born and love becomes a competition: "His plan, she was sure, was to take over the role of caregiver and keep for himself all of their daughter's love."

Barrett's voice is nimble. Narrators shift easily from an old woman abandoned by her children to a teenager making money on various online identities, to a wandering twenty-something looking for adventure in Nairobi. You won't encounter versions of the same character twice in this collection. You also won't come upon the same *kind* of voice. From the pidgin of street children to the English of NGO workers, each narrator—man, woman, or child—is distinct. Each story dives deeply into its particular wedge of the universe. Part of what makes this collection stand out is the wide variety of lives Barrett encompasses over the course of nine stories.

His command of plot and language for a particular space in time is unique and

provoking. The ease with which he settles into a point of view, and the level to which a reader can trust it even if they don't know yet where they are being led, speaks volumes for his talent.

Love is Power, or Something Like That has already been long-listed for the Frank O'Conner International Short Story Award. Barrett, recipient of a Chinua Achebe Center Fellowship among several others, lives in Nigeria.

Hope Mills