



Men Without Bliss

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The subjects of the stories of *Men Without Bliss* postpone satisfaction for a better year. Half of them are gay and half are straight, but there are almost no committed relationships of equals. Most work jobs which lack meaning; homosexual characters are accepted by some families, the object of shame in others, and passed over in silence by more.

Stymied Chicano characters in their twenties or thirties act out of obligation to parents who are aging, failing, distant, deluded, or dying. The young men aren't even liberated when overbearing parents pass on, as illustrated in "Malicious Moons": "...your mother—dead four years and still you carry her coffin on your shoulders." One of the most beguiling stories, "Good Boys," features brothers named after the Three Wise Men, whose behavior has coworkers re-labeling them as Three Stooges. Gaspar is a cruel-hearted looker, Balthazar tries to buck his status as a confirmed mama's boy and the happy-go-lucky Melchor is almost as good at diffusing trouble with humor as he is at burglarizing the mansions around Caliente Valley. More than half of the stories are set in this fictional area, which seems to be near the southern end of California's Central Valley.

"Cactus Flower" projects a very different aura. It is a gothic meditation of a farm laborer who lives with a lovely ghost for company in the desert. González draws on a reserve of fantastic lyricism describing how the ghost became one: "She said she was going to leave him, she said she was going to let their world collapse. So he didn't let her leave, not entirely, taking her neck in his hands and widening her mouth until she burst into the air like a puff of dandelion seeds, an explosion of stars in the sky, an outbreak of marigolds. Such beautiful flowers."

González serves on the Board of Directors for the National Book Critics Circle and is a contributing editor to *Poets and Writers*. His novel, *Crossing Vines* won the *ForeWord Magazine* Book of the Year Award for Fiction in 2003. *Men Without Bliss* is thirteen angles on dreams deferred, on desire that goes unserved, on the potential of undetermined outcomes. This kind of writing connects the particular with the universal and it holds an undeniable draw.

Todd Mercer