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Short Stories

No Animals We Could Name
Ted Sanders
Graywolf Press
978-1-55597-616-3
(July 1, 2012)

In his fascinating debut short story collection, Ted Sanders demonstrates remarkable range. The stories collected here run the gamut from domesticated realism ("Putting the Lizard to Sleep" and "Opinion of Person") to haunting surrealism ("Jane" and "The Lion") to evocative prose poems ("Obit," "The Whale Dream," and "The Heart as a Fist"). It's easy to see why this book won the 2011 Bakeless Prize for Fiction: Ted Sanders is a supple and penetrating writer, and his collection is an accomplished debut.

As the title suggests, animals figure throughout the book, often as stand-ins for the cruel and carnal aspects of our own natures. In "Putting the Lizard to Sleep," a pet lizard is found dead, and a five year old's innocence is called into question when episodes of cruelty start to round out his childish compassion, cowing the father faced with bringing these conflicting instincts into balance. It's a delicate operation, civilizing our baser impulses without destroying fundamental aspects of our essence.

Ruts and rages can be thrilling, relinquishing control to our animal selves strangely transcendent. In "Opinion of Person," a woman spends a lazy morning with her younger boyfriend's roommate. The atmosphere is laced with hostility and lust, prompting the roommate to wonder if prey caught in the jaws of a predator, in its ultimate surrender, comes to know God. But for most of us, carnality lurks in the periphery of consciousness, like the unsettling Saint Bernard in "Airbag" that stalks the edges of a faculty party while the arrival of a dwarf upsets the department's habitual repressions.

In "The Lion," a paralyzed woman mourning the death of her daughter fashions a lion from a bedsheet and her husband's semen, and like the best surreal fiction, the result is a story that is searing and beautiful—and disturbing. As is "Jane," an exquisite account of a lonely husband's masturbatory fantasy.

Ted Sanders is a daring writer, and though his gambles don't always pay off, he's

successful more often than not and is well worth checking out.

Devon Shepherd