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Scars

Juan Jose Saer
Steve Dolph, translator
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This virtuosic novel-in-stories from the late Argentinean writer Juan Jose Saer, first published in 1969, investigates a violent crime from four perspectives. Saer forgoes the expected perspectives of the victim, the orphaned daughter, and those closest to the murder. Instead, he focuses on three men only tangentially connected to the killing: a young reporter, a destitute attorney, and the old judge assigned to the case. Each section is a study of characters living on the edge of sanity, together building to the final stark voice of the murderer to offer a satisfying conclusion.

Saer, who died in 2005, moves easily between voices and styles. As an Argentinean, he draws an inevitable comparison to Borges; as a South American writer newly translated into English, and one often occupied with destitute intellectuals and obscure poets delving into the underworld, his contemporary Bolano may be a touchstone, too. Saer lies somewhere between them, and the quartet of narratives in *Scars* will remind readers of both Borges' surreal fables and Bolano's gritty dramas.

The first section follows a young reporter, Angel. Living with an alcoholic mother and caught in a power struggle with his friend and supervisor at the newspaper that employs him, Angel investigates the murder on a whim rather than for duty. The following section turns abruptly to the decline of an attorney who spends more time gambling in seedy casinos than practicing law, a man once able to predict the results of baccarat, the game he is addicted to. The penultimate section, Sear's most surreal voice, inhabits the mind of the judge assigned to the case, a man fast losing his grip on reality. The judge exists in a fog, seeing the men and women emerging around him as "gorillas" and the scant sleep he finds at night filled with apocalyptic visions. All of these characters come together briefly in the judge's chambers, moments before the murderer's sudden death.

Toward the end of Angel's section, Saer adds a surreal touch to an already outstanding narrative: in the dark streets at night, Angel discovers his doppelganger, another version of himself he is sure has been living in the city all along, the circles they travel in having no reason to overlap until his life begins to unravel. As his story races for its ending, Angel alternately seeks and flees this double.

Betrayed by the union of his mother and his friend, Angel finally confronts this doppelganger: "Whatever his circle—that space set aside for him, which his consciousness drifted through like a wandering, flickering light—it wasn't so different from mine that he could help but look at me through the May rain with a terrified face, marked by the fresh scars from the first wounds of disbelief and recognition."

A reader may react the same way, initially disbelieving Saer's fantastic elements and fractured storyline, but shivering with recognition by the end of this bleak novel. In each section, and especially the murderer's final account, the surreal elements deepen the story's remarkable drama.

MICHAEL BEEMAN (November 17, 2011)

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