



The Middle Ground: Stories

Jeff Ewing

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Pervasive in their record of vanishment, *The Middle Ground's* surprising stories are linked by memory and loss. From ephemeral ice crystals to a sister who disappears, from the illusion of a movie career that never launches to a man whose search for a classmate unearths trouble in his own life, vivid scenarios exude the tension that comes from unfulfilled hopes. Jeff Ewing explores the turning points that mark human lives.

Whether the stories are steeped in one-time encounters or focused on everyday relationships, scenes reveal inner worlds and rural spaces. The characters' failings, disappointments, fears, and love unfold in measured tones, creating desolate portraits. They hit a raw nerve, probing uncomfortable spaces.

In two stories, accidental falls result in youths coming to harm while the main characters leave the scene. An epileptic lets his unusual marriage end. Families grow estranged by the choices some of their members make. In one instance, a glass eye becomes a nearly grotesque badge that keeps its owner in a state of bristling discontent. A standout story, "Ice Flowers," features emotional frozenness in the face of too many griefs. Ewing imbues these stories with unease, never entirely tipping toward menace. Instead, subtle erosions of the spirit hold people back from their better selves.

Many characters display passivity, but they're drawn with skillful wholeness, even if what they think or do leads them to follow familiar paths. When they do break out of their own limitations, the events are all the more noteworthy.

At their best, these stories concentrate on lonely eccentrics and wanderers who find their own brand of solace in "beautiful emptiness." Ewing's debut tunes to a haunting static.

KAREN RIGBY (January/February 2019)

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