FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

General

Very Much Like Desire
Diane Lefer
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Short story collections are tricky beasts, mixing many lives in a unifying style, be the tone wry, solemn, anxious, or deadpan. In this, her second collection after The Circles I Move In, Lefer might be narrating a museum's audiotape, each story like a diorama of slightly sad, slightly jaded pleasure pioneers, those on the lonely periphery of others' passions. Her voice is good company, self-depreciatingly alert and droll—cough and you miss the humor underneath the quiet desperation. A Manhattan woman casually agrees to courier money to a Turkish prisoner's wife as if it were a blind date; a Chicago girl tries and fails to blend into a small town ethos by befriending a homeless woman; an idealistic nurse accompanies her lover, an Iowan ex-priest, to a "terrorist Tupperware" gun-buying party in the Bronx for South African militants; a lost anthropologist wanders the Dakota badlands with a sentient mental patient, both women fearing a local man and his veiled threats of abuse and punishment.

A teacher of creative writing at Vermont College and a Los Angeles native, Lefer is fearless in her compass, folding a huge map of America into small, sharp observations of the intimate lives of those dispossessed of their faith in the future. Though her imaginative leaps are confident, and her intelligence obvious, the cumulative experience of the collection is somewhat reductive, like having the same earnest conversation with a series of identical strangers at a party. Stories wander and collapse into fleeting, inconsequential gestures of isolating fatigue, denying the reader a sense of engagement, of narrative pulse. Aptly, the most vivid pieces come from first-person narrators, giving a spark of immediacy that is welcome. It is a witty poetry that knows it suffers from too much self-awareness. "My heart slapped along with the windshield wipers, making ambient contact but no headway," he says, driving through a fog of Valium, scotch, and oppressive gray skies the color of cardboard, only then seeing a flock of geese turning into a spiral of black smoke.

It's the kind of arresting moment of unearned beauty that summarizes the book, where

desire and loss unspool together.

Leeta Taylor