

Volt

Alan Heathcock

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This is lawless country. The terrain of these stories is the West, the prairies and fields of small-town America, where working the gravel pits or freight yards is as high as one can expect to go, and where policing the community is a one-woman show.

The characters flit in and out of these stories and, despite the open space all around them, their lives are constricted like “dim stars turning in fractured tracks.” Grudges are settled the same way crimes are handled, with vigilant vindictive relish. A girlfriend in “Furlough” gets her comeuppance when a surprise turns out to be payback for cheating on her man. In “Peacekeeper,” a pedophile killer is meted out punishment fitting his miserable deeds. In “The Daughter,” a woman mourns with an “unsettled yearning to be apart from all things human.”

The stories in this collection are charged with moral ambiguities, hence the title *Volt*. They have a way of jolting the reader into attention much like a cattle prod, forcing us to go in a direction we might not care to go. Part of this ability to shock comes from the inchoate thoughts of the characters, part from the images created by the author. There are mazes, floods, and arson; there are references to power wires and electric storms, as well as fireworks, auroras, projector beams, lanterns, fires, and many other forms of illumination: “Light throbbled in the folds of clouds”—all of which fail ironically to shed much light on “the wicked world below,” or the “lonesome pain” of some. Many of the stories take place in the dark, either at night or as dusk is falling. And when flashes of insight come, they have a way of striking both the character and the reader with powerful, unexpected force: “My faith’s in knowing the edges of our universe are the upturned palms of a benevolent God.”

The author has published in *Zoetrope*, *Kenyon*, and *Virginia Quarterly*. He teaches fiction in Idaho. What unifies the stories in this collection beyond place are themes of longing and release, freedom and entrapment, courage and defeat. What elevates them is the level of authorial compassion for his characters. He delves into their thoughts, traces their lives, and pities them like dogs found “froze up” in the ruts of a cornfield when they cut the crop.

TRINA CARTER (March / April 2011)

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