Reviews

Ian Colford. *A Dark House and Other Stories*. *Vagrant Press, 2019. $19.95*

If you consume short stories like loneliness wolfs down the bonbons from out the box of Pot o' Gold, you won't be disappointed by Ian Colford's new collection of stories. He's as adept as any writer of potboilers in his handling of the friction-free clichés that are so necessary for the pace of plots to keep ahead of the reading eye. However, if your consumption of literary fiction is less hedonistic and more gastronomic, that is, less driven by Dionysius and more aligned with the sublime conceptualisations of Apollo, you'll find *A Dark House and Other Stories* even more to your liking.

Consider the following paragraph from the story, "McGowan on the Mount". Rosie, only 16-years-old, has, through an upending of fortune, been forced to do the shopping for her heretofore upper-class family.

> Rosie's family had suffered reversals. Her father had inherited his money and never felt encumbered by the necessity to prepare himself for a career of any kind. When his investments soured he tried to cover his loses through borrowing, and then gambling. At fifty and suffering the pinch of want for the first time in his life – and with the added burden of a sizable family under the care of the docile, uneducated woman he had married – he indulged his taste for liquor and had soon lost the country house along with the heirlooms and artwork. His fall was precipitous and tragic and, trying to find a place for herself in a way of life that lacked even basic comforts let alone the luxuries she had known for fifteen of her sixteen years, Rosie could summon no compassion for the man. She recalled for McGowan's benefit the day the family was evicted from their ten-bedroom home on Young Avenue and evoked with her fury as much as with her words the crushing humiliation of being sneered at by a servant girl to whom she had always been generous and bullied by a waitress at a restaurant where she learned that her father owed an accumulated bill of more than three thousand dollars. When he finally settled up with the bank the family's depleted resources left them with the most common of middle-class means, which in those days meant a modest house in a decent neighbourhood but which also required a stable income to cover ongoing expenses. Rosie shared a room with her two

younger sisters. Her eldest brother, the family's shining hope for the future, was to attend university.

There can be no doubt that Colford knows the full effect of the language he employs here; namely, that it is transparent and pragmatic. Its purpose is to establish a milestone in a main character's life (not Rosie). Surely not every ingredient in a story needs to resonate with thematic weight. In fact, if they did, not only the pace of the narrative would slow to a crawl. So too might the passion and that peculiar type of aggression that roils in the hearts of characters also flatline. Fortunately, it is exactly here, in the delineation of character, where Ian Colford is so skilled. This is obvious throughout the collection.

Rosie is not the center of gravity in "McGowan on the Mount" and therefore her presence does not suffer by being passed-off in this perfunctory way. This is a short story, not a novel. The novel, as the origin of the genre's title suggests, is concerned with world building. Certainly, the dividing line between the genres is never solid; nonetheless, it is safe to say that what a reader expects from a short story is not the same as what is expected from a novel.

Short stories may not build worlds but, most often, they do build characters, or at least reveal them and their truth. "McGowan on the Mount," is not an unusual example of Colford's ability to compose rich, miniature biographies of his characters. Back stories, flashbacks, internal monologues are put to use to intensify plots as well as flesh-out character in most of the eight stories collected here. Colford draws character through the slow accretion of emotional gravity. A character's story increases in density, atom by atom, the way hydrogen gas ultimately becomes carbon inside a star. And the characters he draws are fresh and original, despite sometimes being caught up in experiences that may not always be unique. Fortunately, if not unique, under Ian Colford's aesthetic command their experiences are always instructive.

But, the true art of the well-purposed cliché is knowing the extent to which a story can fall back on what we might normally call "normal". As they appear in those plot-driven consumables referenced above, cliched language, character, and event come so fast that they ultimately have little to no consequence. By the end of the trip, it's as if the reader has gone nowhere and done nothing and, certainly, met no one. Ian Colford's stories are so satisfying and resonant because he knows precisely how to keep the reader's attention where it should be.

Colford's sure hand with the mundane ensures that his stories have an impact that is both universal and humane. To be clear, there is no

cliched spectacle or sensationalism or melodrama being relied upon in any of these stories. Nobody gets stabbed or drowns or is humiliated utterly. (Granted, such intense experiences are sometimes true to life, just not to the degree to which the hacks imply that they are.) There are the requisite Hardy moments (lost letters, overheard remarks) but, as with Hardy, those ingredients somehow manage to merely drive a plot, without interfering in the author's sincere portrayal of human suffering. And, for better or for worse, human suffering is the common element in all these stories. Some end happily, others not. All of them, however, are rich enough to redeem even the sufferings of characters toward whom we react negatively.

The sheer variety of lives lived in *A Dark House and Other Stories* gives it a reach equal to a Hardy novel. Colford convincingly articulates the consciousness and mentality of all manner of person. "McGowan on the Mount" ranges over a 65-year-long lifespan and over two continents. "The Ugly Girl" draws us into the mind of a Dostoevskian underground man. And "The Dictator Considers His Regime," through its range of narrators, encircles the disintegration of a military dictatorship in a somewhat reimagined Portugal.

But what is even more impressive and crucial to an effective and lasting story is a writer's ability to present the unfolding of self as it develops and (hopefully) enlarges over time. Consider Warren, in "The Comfort of Knowing," a superficially self-righteous 57-year-old, as he slowly and incrementally confronts the confusions that follow from his honest attempt to live ethically in the Kantian, duty-bound sense. Fittingly, Warren is a Civics teacher so he can't abide the nihilism that masks itself as tolerance. But neither can he (and nor does he wish to) blind himself to the contradictions that all moral codes trip up in. And he's not about to pass off his responsibility to make moral decisions by seeking guidance from equally fallible 'experts'. Rather, he searches inward for truth.

At this point in the story Warren has gone for a drive, to maybe clear his head and hopefully also the path forward. He is in possession of photographs that show his married sister (his youngest sibling and a former flower child of the 60's) engaged in an illicit love affair. He needs to know what he should do with these photographs.

> An autumn night is the perfect time for taking risks, for driving too fast, for falling in love. There seems to be an increase in social activity too, as neighbours return from cottages and emerge from their summer lethargy as if awakening after a period of hibernation. I was still wondering what to do about the photographs, but each day brought with

> it the distraction of teaching while trying to learn the names of a new crop of students and, after I got home, of meeting people I hadn't seen for months who came to visit or were out walking along the street. I had no leisure to think, and one evening I took the car and set out for nowhere in particular. I drove over the bridge and got on the highway for the airport. But I passed the airport and kept going. The sky was clear. As I passed the Elmsdale exit the glowing sapphire blue began deepening toward dusk. A short while later, stars appeared. Sometimes I look at the night sky and all I can see is the presence of the heavenly host, but other times, it presents a disturbing enigma with nothing behind it but the random and haphazard forces of nature. I'm seized by doubt and begin to wonder if the path I've followed is an illusion and if one day I'll find myself at the edge of the abyss with no option but to step into a vast and terrible unknown. It's appalling to have your faith shaken by something as ordinary as the stars in the sky, and though it doesn't happen often, when it does the ordeal leaves me jittery and depressed.
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> I turned off the highway and after driving some distance along the secondary road came across a diner. I wasn't exactly sure where I was, but I was getting hungry and thought a piece of pie might do the trick. I pulled onto the gravel lot, found a place to park, and got out. My legs wobbled beneath me, and when I looked up I thought I might actually topple over. But the stars were still in their place, nothing had changed, and seeing this was almost like a confirmation of something. I gathered my strength and went inside, where the air smelled of home cooking and a noisy community of the young and old seemed to have gathered for no other purpose than to mingle and talk and listen to country music. The sentiments of country music always seem to function on a primeval or subconscious level, and as I took a seat and listened to a girl singing about finding herself 'safe in the arms of love,' I too seemed swept to safety by an unseen hand.

There follows, as one would expect, a brief and ordinary conversation between our protagonist, Warren, and a cheery waitress. He orders the pie, observes the goings on, and begins to feel as if he's found "his way back home after a long and perilous journey." Not long after, standing in the parking lot, Warren reflects on the "cleansing effect" of the surroundings.

> On the road a man was walking a dog, and their trust in one another seemed profound and inexhaustible. All around the world, it seemed to me, people were finding the strength to carry on and the courage to face the unpleasant facts of life, and it was clear I was not to be spared. Without even knowing I'd reached a decision, I got back in the car and drove home.

In "The Ugly Girl," the narrator, Barry, perverse and slightly sociopathic, nevertheless elicits sympathy. His struggles with his career and his broken marriage become fable-like: the reader is lifted out and away from the miasma of his confused perceptions and actions and comprehends not just the moral (think 'The Ugly Duckling') but also the wider context within which putative monsters are redeemed.

Leaving the sterile consultation room where his ex-wife and her lawyer have presented him with the final papers dissolving his 15-year marriage, Barry next appears (nay, materializes) outside, in a place that is never clearly explained. As far as Barry is concerned it's a nether world; the reader's world.

> Suddenly I found myself surrounded by strangers, a sea of them; each and every one a face I didn't know. Their eyes skimmed the surface of me but seemed unable to probe deeper, a sign, I hoped, that I would survive this, the worst life had to offer. As if from miles away, hundreds of footfalls formed a clattering echo in my head, I heard phones ring and doors slam, and a multitude of voices drifted over and swarmed around me, not one of them speaking words I was meant to hear. It seemed another realm, and I realized all at once it was precisely that: the realm of the living. I remained where I was for a few moments, just to gather strength. But then I began to notice an expression of uneasiness settle into the faces of the men and women who approached where I stood, noticed too that they were all following the same wide arc around me, as if I were an obstacle placed mischievously in their path or a reminder of some unpleasant thing they would rather not think about. So with a decisive movement, my first in quite some time, I pulled on my gloves and headed off in a direction that seemed, more or less, the right one to take.

I don't believe one can do justice to Ian Colford's skill as a writer without extensive quotation, if for no other reason than to put on display the pure poetry of his descriptions. And by 'poetry', I mean language that is brimming with echo. What I hope these excerpts illustrate is the brilliance with which Ian Colford moves plot, character, and thematic heft toward satisfying resolutions. I hasten to add, however, that 'resolution' is not the main impellor. As with all successful short stories, Colford's epiphanies are rarely open-and-shut, let alone blinding or thorough. Ambiguity broadens the impact and clarifies the significance of endings. Colford's endings – as they should – usually heighten the tensions, rather than resolve them.

There are four other stories in this book that I have not mentioned. Three of these are told from or focus on female perspectives. They are no less effective than the four examined above and for the same reasons discussed here. All eight, in fact, are worthy of a much closer analysis. In the near future, when literary journals, such as this one, become multimedia vehicles, and book reviews arrive as podcasts within them, stories as good Ian Colford's will warrant forums, rather than a single point of view. Buffets of opinions and reactions, in other words, rather than the meagre fare of a lone reviewer. All of which is just to say, pick up a copy of this book for yourself and a regular dinner companion. And have a feast.

--David B. Hickey

Leslie Vryenhoek. *We All Will Be Received*. *Breakwater, 2019. $20.33*

Leslie Vryenhoek's new novel, *We All Will Be Received* (2019), opens in the late 1970s as its protagonist silently, fearfully escapes from a motel bed. She's sharing it with a man, a dealer named Slake, who we infer is her abuser, since she's terrified that he'll wake up and accost her. Luckily, her disappearing act succeeds. She steals a duffel bag stuffed with bloody clothes and drug money, escapes to the highway, and hitches a ride with a trucker – a creep who soon demands a hand job as reward for his trouble. She escapes from him, too. Then she finds a safer travel companion, a garrulous Newfoundlander named Jerry. Happy to widen the distance from Slake, the young woman travels with Jerry from Ontario all the way to the west coast of Newfoundland.

Here she takes on a new identity, giving herself the name Dawn Taylor. She settles in Corner Brook, getting a job in the same hotel where she first stays. At this juncture, the novel abandons the rambunctiousness of its first chapter and settles into its principal narrative, which depicts, over the course of several decades, Dawn's reinvented life, lonely by necessity and design. With two exceptions, her relationships stay superficial and at arm's length. It's only fitting that she's so closely associated with hotels: they're symbols of her transience.

Dawn is not, at least by temperament, a passive character, as her gutsy escape from Slake proves. Eventually she buys and runs a hotel of her own on Newfoundland's northern peninsula. All the same, her hobby is pressing flowers, and for three and a half decades she's a bit of a pressed