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Earl Ganz

Gennie Nord

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Earl Ganz, *Animal Care*,
Lynx House Press, Amherst, MA, 1990

Reviewed by Gennie Nord

Raymond Carver once said, "I think a little menace is fine to have in a story. For one thing, it's good for the circulation." In *Animal Care*, a fine collection of eclectic stories, Earl Ganz gives us enough tension to unblock clogged arteries. What will happen to the young Jewish woman who throws a specimen jar containing cockroach embryos down the toilet, after urinating in a city-hardened, Montana Blackfeet's bed? Will the GI with dislocated shoulders, who looks like "a tiny khaki bird twitching on the wire," survive his crucifixion by the Chinese on Korea's Million Dollar Hill? Who will stop the egomaniacal doctors from torturing both animals and humans in the name of science and progress?

While reading these stories, we often feel as though we're trapped in a German Expressionist painting, one where Franz Marc's diagonal lines of emotional energy keep cutting us off from reality, from security. Or maybe we watch characters we've known all our lives begin to explode like one of Boccioni's Futurist sculptures. By the end of the book we certainly agree with the Greek Stoic Epictetus: "No man is free who is not master of himself."

Dr. Morgenstern, the high-paid New York dentist in the ironic "Swastika Painting," loses control of his complacent life in one awful day. On his way to work, he squares off with a bigot driving an English Ford; he allows a wealthy, alcoholic patient to swill scotch with her Novocaine; he loses his temper and accidentally hits his assistant with a faulty dental spoon; he discovers the reality of being Jewish and the irony of being mistaken for a racist desecrator in front of Temple Emanuel. In the midst of this chaos, Ganz sprinkles some amazing images: "And he found himself staring at her pumpkin colored face and the pointed little teeth he had just carved." And while writing about Nazis: "In a sense it was natural they would turn up here and there, embers trying to land on something flammable, trying to catch fire again."

We learn something from these stories—how dentists shape expensive phony teeth, how to kill hapless mutts with incompetence, how young bamboo shoots can be used for torture. In "Sunshine Soldier," Ganz gives us a history lesson about Greenwich Village, how tobacco fields become boulevards for the wealthy, how smallpox forced migration to the Village, how ethnicity took hold, how drugs and music and art found a permanent home. The masochistic furniture movers in the story

represent the levels of ignorance inherent in cities where rapid changes in lifestyles are the norm, a norm that keeps people from truly understanding each other. While moving paintings for a Japanese gallery owner, the men become part of the Village's mutability. They fight. They dance. They eat. They become a new movement in themselves, a living testimony to the transitoriness of a place like Greenwich Village.

Ganz uses complicated narration, unusual points of view, in "Animal Care," a story about those torture chambers known as animal labs. At first we think that Lena is a woman walking down a road, but we soon realize that she's a pregnant dog about to have the hospital visit of her life. Here we get both animal and human viewpoints. This story will make you sympathize with those animal rights activists who break into labs at night, setting the victims free. Although we get messages, Ganz is never heavy-handed. In a subtle way, we begin to cringe at what we've accepted as the underside of life. Lena and the old bitch force us to get down on four paws, to see the world from a slightly different angle.

We don't like what we see. We're reminded of all the gray people who inhabit offices, hospitals, university departments, government research centers. We suddenly realize that we're lab animals too, with nothing but hope to keep us from killing ourselves or strangers on the street.

Storytelling can be dangerous. Clem and Claire Lebarge become victims of the stories they tell each other about their Bowery neighborhood in "Because We're So Big." Under the stairs of their apartment building, a World War II deserter meets his maker in the implausible guise of a German shepherd. The story seems incredible, out of this world, something akin to what André Gide once said of Kafka's writing: "I could not say what I admire most, the naturalistic presentation of an imaginary world, rendered believable through a minute precision of the images, or the daring turn to the mysterious." Often, Ganz hooks into a nightmare, one that flings his characters and readers over the viable parameters of the world.

"The Monk of the Bitter Cucumber," my favorite story in the collection, reminds me of those old Chinese meditational landscapes, the ones you focus on for hours, trying to enter the bamboo forest with the old monk, crossing arched bridges, smelling lotus blossoms, transcending distances and anguish. This is a story about creation, about writing and painting, about inspiration, about the great artists who've lived before us. The French painter Jean Dubuffet always sprinkled a little dust or sand in his ink, so he would be closer to the formless, the common, that which continuously exists. He said, "What the paper attracts exists, only it has never been seen before." In the story, three unlikely characters