



Review - Venus Drive

by Sam Lipsyte

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Review by Miranda Hale

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Sam Lipsyte's *Venus Drive*, a collection of short stories revolving around a nameless small town that is home to the title street's shattered land of dreams, reflects a deliciously dark sensibility and humor, yet also one that shows an understanding of the beauty and meaning that everyone seeks to find in life, and how this lack of beauty and meaning can result in meaningless living, addiction, and depression. His language is as fierce as it is gentle, all while describing people and places that reek of both pain and ennui. The narrative perspectives taken are critical and realistic at the same time that they are compassionate towards the circumstances that have so profoundly and deeply shaped the lives of these flawed yet easily identifiable characters. This is a compassion that is unspoken but obvious to the critical reader.

One of the primary characters of these stories is Gary, a one-time punk rock icon who feels a failure and who now is an inconsequential drug dealer and self-actualization guru. Gary travels throughout many of the stories, often serving as a symbol of the intangible idea of redemption for which these characters are all searching.

Perhaps the collection's most touching tale, "The Morgue Rollers" is the story of "The Chersky Girl" and her best friend, a Chinese-American girl named Mona. The Chersky girl lives in a Jewish household that is weighed down with its own anti-Semitism and alcoholism and one in which the girl craves her father's attention and sheer beautiful experience in equal measures. Lipsyte's language is incredibly poignant and appropriate to the young girl narrator, as when the girl describes her relationship with Mona as "we are best friends with our shaved ices on the spit-brown stoop, and we are best friends on our roller skates. Everyone who sees us together, the Chersky girl, the pretty one, the only one, and Mona Yee, Chinese pretty" (28). The girls skate through the town together, past racism and neglect and pain, all the while fascinated with the story of the narrator's Uncle Joey, a gambler with debts to pay.

One night the girls go out to be "secret night rollers" (30) and end up at the morgue. Lipsyte's talent for evoking the essence of a wise-beyond-her-years yet still very confused at the painful adult world girl is formidable. The girls enter the morgue, feeling thrilled at their adventure, and end up finding Uncle Joey there, who has been shot, which reaffirms the narrator's confused vision of the world as painful but with so much simultaneous potential for beauty. The story ends with the line, "looks like an epidemic to me" (33), appropriately reflecting the story's perspectives on pain and death.

These stories are dirty, painful, seemingly hopeless, but simultaneously lovely in their refusal to live in anything but the intense present. Paradoxically, somehow, these stories of the wasting of life instead subtly yet vigorously reaffirm and redeem the idea of life's precious nature. Lipsyte's world is a ghost world, a commercialized and frequently sterile life whose inhabitants are wandering around aimlessly, looking for beauty and meaning wherever they can find it, but more often losing themselves in a daze of addiction or pain on the road there. This is a world populated by young sadists at a children's summer camp, stone Trotskyites, morally questionable babysitters, and bored, hopeless corporate workers, among others. These are important stories from an extremely gifted and beautiful writer. Pick them up, they will effect you with their desire, regret, and unflinching hope in the potential for beauty and redemption.

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[Miranda Hale](#) is a first-year graduate student in English Literature who lives in Spokane, Washington and who reads entirely too much Sylvia Plath.