

# OUR DOUR AMERICANA

Stacey Levine

**STORIES IN THE WORST WAY**

Gary Lutz

3rd Bed

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In the early- to mid-1990s, maverick Knopf editor Gordon Lish published several youngish authors whose works were language-driven and formally daring. Via Knopf, Lish ushered into print first fictions from Ben Marcus, Brian Evenson, Gary Lutz, Diane Williams, and Noy Holland, a fact that still seems remarkable, given the unconventionality of these writers and the profit-minded, quick-sales melee of corporate publishing that is as raucous today as it was ten years ago. (Lish's larger stable of writers also included Raymond Carver, Harold Brodkey, David Ohle, Joy Williams, Amy Hempl, and others.) Lish left Knopf in 1995, his fresh crop of experimental authors assigned to a publicity department that didn't quite understand how to promote challenging, rather uncategorizable work. Eventually, Marcus's *Age of Wire and String* (1995) was reissued by Dalkey Archive Press; Williams also found a publisher in Dalkey; and Evenson went on to publish with Wordcraft of Oregon and Four Walls Eight Windows. Now, 3rd Bed, a press that grew out of a Rhode Island-based lit journal, has reissued Lutz's 1996 collection, and it is also scheduled to republish Ohle's first novel this year.

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Many writers, editors, and readers have told me that a next wave of hot, strong American literature will eventually rise from the machinery of small presses, and the Lutz book signals to me that this prediction may come true. *Stories in the Worst Way* is a jolty gem, stylistically calm and torrid, puzzling and complete. Since its Knopf publication, it's enjoyed a word-of-mouth readership, but 3rd Bed editor Matthew Derby told me he wanted to ensure the collection's republi-

cation because "the fact that the book was disappearing was an outrage—it is so freakishly brilliant. Everyone I knew was handing around a single, worn hardcover...I wanted to reprint it partially to convince myself that it actually exists." *SITWW* sets us in the midst of dour Americana. Its haphazard, fed-up narrators exist in nondescript office cubicles, motels, roadsides, and other queasy-making locales ("Center Square") that somehow recall Denis Johnson's landscapes; its characters endure sex and sadness in a somewhat similar way to Dennis Cooper's characters. Far beyond this, though, Lutz's writing offers pleasures of language that are unremitting, unique, and which nicely bring shape to the book's thematics.

Lutz's prose has a wealth of eccentrically cast, muscly verbs. "I adolcesced diplomatically by his side," declares one narrator. Another keeps the hair on his own arm "sleeved out of sight." A girl's legs are "splodged" with bites; a gawky student "pudges" into a laundry room. Lutz's characters are also small-minded, able to be weirdly, casually cruel. The handmade, tweaked verbs, adjectives, and phrases Lutz employs to describe them form an architecture that echoes the homely, gnarly underworlds of their lives.

This fiction's language is denser than is usually necessary or even efficient, yet the payoff is the thick Lutz baffle of words, which nearly poisons the reader with its creepy-flat tonality. A man finds his girlfriend's three children "batched and mumpish" on a carpet; the contents of a bag are arranged "calendarially" against a door. Characters drift into half-relationships tending toward obsolescence, and parents and children regard each other with obliquely disappointed demeanors: "By grown, I mean she no longer lives where I am. By daughter, I mean she gives off, suffers from, comes down with." Another narrator observes: "Marriage is what—the most pointless distance between two points? Or the foulest? Which?"

These 36 stories (all but four are written in the first person) contain some truly obtuse passages, but generally they make complete literal and intuitive sense. Lutz withholds traditionally descriptive language in favor of a tight-lipped narration deploying a sour, sexual tang and the unmistakably American danger and unease associated with fake wood paneling and the isolated roadside gas station. In these settings, characters

express triumph upon achieving small dominances over each other, or even upon displacing one nasty psychological drive for another.

In "Certain Riddances," an office-worker narrator obsesses over his coworker's pantyhose color to sickening excess, finally assembling "an almanac" that "recorded the date, the shade of hosiery she had worn that day, and an entirely speculative notation about the degree of opacity and what it implied about whatever man had been entrenched in her the night before (sample 'June 6, charcoal, glaucomatous—how remarkably hateful of you and your niggard')." The unnamed narrator slips his hostile booklets into his coworker's office mailbox, a small act of transgression that reads as disturbing and a little bit funny.

Lutz has a certain bravery for depicting such sick activity; his stance toward his characters' pent-up, elaborate anger, misogynies, and petty activities seems mocking, spoofish, empathetic, and deadpan all. What resonates first here is a certainty that human life offers little to hold onto, that we will invariable disappoint and disgust each other, perhaps for no reason at all. "Spare me," as one character puts it, "the spectacle of people fending for themselves."

Some readers might decide that the collection's depressive affect offers little relief from its own view of life's disappointments, unfairnesses, and scant fulfillments (aside from the small, yet hearty, satisfactions of brief sadism or abjection). But I think Lutz's language itself creates a kind of power and liberation. Its weird architecture of unusual syntax and verbs gives the language a life of its own, and its imaginative power affords these rumpiled, oppressed characters spaces where only they can live, as fractiously as they see fit.

The collection's reissue offers readers a new chance to dip into a strong, gutsy work of fiction. Read it for its unique linguistic invention and its unremorseful, unnamed fathers, daughters, sons, and girlfriends roaming their American locales, not in search of anything.

*Stacey Levine is the author of My Horse and Other Stories, Dra—, and a forthcoming novel, Frances Johnson, which will be published by Clear Cut Press this year.*