Meteor Storm
by Wayne Tefs

Reviewed by Gillian Harding-Russell

In the short stories in Meteor Storm, Wayne Tefs examines power struggles and a propensity for manipulation and bullying, the sometimes uneasy relationship between men and women, men’s capacity for violence and malevolence and what can turn a decent man into something else, the unpredictability of life and its paradoxical coincidences. These are stories of passion in which the proverbial linkage of sex and violence provides an edge without melodrama as well as a kind of wisdom emerging out of recognition.

In a brief prologue, Tefs defines the astronomical phenomenon of the meteor storm so that we, as readers, may more fully appreciate its metaphoric power as cosmic or inevitable but naturally induced incidental disaster in application to each of the stories and to the collection as a whole. In the title story, the young male speaker’s mother’s boyfriend’s brother commits suicide, and we see how this one incident brings disaster to them all. One of the most disturbing scenes is the one in which the mother, Edna, expresses her pain and grief over her son’s death by attempting to lay guilt on her surviving son by forcing him to accept a .22 gun that his brother may have used to commit suicide. Edna makes Tony writhe in mental agony as she presses him to take the gun with the lie that his dead brother, Nathan, had wanted him to have it.

“It’s a .22,” she said.
“I know what it is,” Tony said.
“Your father bought one for each of you when you were boys. Christmas.”
“I know that too, Maw.” Tony’s voice was growing increasingly irritable.
“Take the damn thing!” Doreen was almost screaming. “Will you just?”
“And he wanted you to have his, see, his last request kind of thing.”
“For God’s sake, Maw,” Tony said in a rage. “He didn’t even leave a note!” (102)

The would-be brother-in-law’s suicide leads the speaker’s mother to drive home at breakneck speed, causing road rage in another driver when she cuts him off. The other driver in turn forces
her to stop and threatens to break her car window. Tony is driven to defend his girlfriend by shooting the man in the shoulder with the ill-fated .22. Doreen then decides to leave Tony, as he has not proven himself to be the man she had considered him to be. The story ends with a literal meteor storm, which lends a poetic poignancy to the denouement. Here are all the story-telling elements of fast-paced and poetic drama, but with a core sincerity, and a truth in the portraiture.

Father-daughter schisms appear in “Tough Love,” something of an ironic misnomer. A father’s misogyny and shortcomings taint his relationship with his daughter who, in his view, has grown precocious wearing lipstick and going out with the wrong sort, notably “Indian” boys.

Another kind of power struggle manifests itself in “Walleyes,” in which a surly stranger joins the narrator’s camping group for a beer and sets out to pick a fight. Just as the narrator is ready to punch him, the female proprietor of the camping grounds intercedes with firm gentleness that miraculously works. In “College Boy” a bully seeks to compensate for his shortcomings by picking a fight with the resented “college boy” narrator whom he deems his superior and for that reason must better in a physical fight.

From seedy scenes in bars, Tefs takes us to the other side of the law in “Picket Line,” in which a rookie policeman is knifed by a mine striker. Most compelling in these stories is the process of enlightenment the narrator goes through, and “Picket Lines” is no exception. Larry Murty watches his comrade, Roberts, a police officer of a higher ranking who had experienced the Korean war, transformed by the young and newly married Dave’s senseless knifing. “Maybe it was that Dave was so young, maybe he felt like a father to him, maybe he felt he’d failed him.”

The narrator confesses to a similar rage for revenge building in himself:

I know I felt wild myself. I could have killed the next man who said a stupid thing and I wondered about that for a moment. That’s how little it takes, I thought, to turn a man crazy. Your friend goes down and your blood goes up, and you don’t know what you’re liable to do next. Killing was not out of the question. (208)

The final story in the collection, “The Black Coat,” has an intricately woven structure that lends it a kind of wandering meaning, leaving the reader with the pleasurable sense of discovering the truth. The coat that the narrator’s mother buys for her son, Arnold, to wear to her brother’s funeral is afterwards passed on to his father, who subsequently puts one hundred crisp bills in its pocket. When his father later passes away, the black coat once more returns to Arnold, and both the coincidence of its return and the coat’s suave familiarity strike a haunting chord in the narrator.
There was one odd thing. Father died on my birthday, something that occurs fairly often I gather from what the undertaker let slip at the funeral; family members seem to vibrate on the same wavelength when it comes to these momentous occasions. (222)

In the course of this poignant story, the narrator not only comes to terms with his fear of death but is inspired to consider its mystery, a sense of its cyclical déjà vu reified by the image of the returning black coat.

*Meteor Storm* is an exciting and often gripping collection of stories, including not only much popular sex and violence but haunting us with something to think about afterwards.

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