

Labyrinths and Cathedrals

Outside Is the Ocean by Matthew Lansburgh (University of Iowa Press, 2017).

Winner of the 2017 Iowa Short Fiction Award, Matthew Lansburgh's first collection possesses the satisfying reach and depth of a novel. The fractured chronology of its fifteen stories enacts the chaotic, sometimes traumatic experiences of the central characters—a German post-war immigrant named Heike and her vulnerable, fiercely intelligent, yet isolated son Stewart. Structurally, the collection returns the reader to a time, not so distant really, when people wrote letters and life was not so frenetically paced. Each of the stories has a date as part of its title. The earliest, "California (1967)," introduces thirty-year-old Heike, who arrives in California from Germany after the war. Almost half a century later, in "Enormous in the Moonlight (2014)," Heike writes to her now-estranged adult son, Stewart, addressing him as "Mein lieber Sohn" (My beloved Son). Her letter offers a window into who Heike is, and why: she acts and reacts with the vehemence of a child whose development was arrested during and after the war. At the same time, we see an old woman's struggle—any mother's struggle—to bear the fact that her son has abandoned her. The collection focuses on Heike and Stewart individually, and also, inevitably, on their intimacy as mother and son, a relationship that is dysfunctional yet at times devastatingly beautiful.

Enlarging further the generations and the reach of lives defined by war, there are the stories involving Galina, the Russian orphan whom Heike adopts later in life, rather whimsically and irresponsibly. Galina, born with only one arm, enters *Outside Is the Ocean* as a menacing child. Heike is totally incapable of raising

Galina, though she somehow manages to do so with the help of a stepdaughter, another husband, and the other strays she pulls into her volatile circle. In one of the collection's most profound scenes, Stewart, by then an assistant professor in an English department in Boston, tries to befriend and to understand Galina. His attempt is all the more powerful given the agony of his own childhood as Heike's son.

As a central character and a complex, dangerous force, Heike is always a child of World War II Germany and also the vulnerable young woman who comes to the U.S. to realize a better life. This dream of America leads Heike to her first husband Raymond, Stewart's father, a disturbed man who lives at the edge of a forest. In "House Made of Snow (1978)," Raymond forces a very young Stewart to read aloud from "Hansel and Gretel" on a cold winter night. When Stewart falters, his father sends the small child out into the snow. Raymond is a deadly character, one allied with Thanatos, and, in keeping with the archetypal, pagan feel of many of these stories, he calls to mind Goya's image of Cronus devouring his young. As with many who commit acts of harm, Raymond is powerless in the larger world, which feeds into his misuse of his authority over those whom he should protect and love. As for Heike, like characters in the world of fairy tales, she is the vanishing or subconscious past, palpable and bizarre, and sometimes terrifyingly funny.

Stewart, however, is the present and the future, and *Outside Is the Ocean* is ultimately his story, a story shaped by the lives of those who have cared for, loved, and harmed him. Though the stories are told in the third person (except for the first-person of the letters and the opening story), we come to a deep understanding of Stewart's experience. The narrative voice throughout the collection is keenly self-aware, bracing, and heartbreaking, but also funny in the way that philosophy-infused comedy can be funny—comedy that depends upon perspective or distance.

The title story, set in 1994, is both exquisitely frightening and compassionate; Lansburgh seems to superimpose Stewart's childhood with his father on the one night that Stewart spends with a sadistic but compelling Nigerian businessman who has an equally

complex and troubling relationship with his mastiff, Max. (Animals, in *Outside Is the Ocean*, do a great deal of work.) Sometimes violence, especially sexual violence, can feel gratuitous, or what that master of the modern psychological novel, Henry James, would have called “sensational.” Not here. In “Outside Is the Ocean,” we understand the impact of a cycle of chaos and violence that ends up becoming a pattern in the individual’s nervous system.

With the last story, “Buddy” (2019),” Lansburgh could have left us in the darkness, on the edge of that wood into which the child Hansel—for there is no Gretel—must venture forth. But Lansburgh is compassionate enough to recover Stewart. Here, despite Stewart’s isolation, a hard-won hope emerges from the duress of the visit of Stewart’s former partner, Luis, who comes to Boston for a conference. The event that triggered the breakup is particularly difficult for Stewart, given that Luis left not long after Stewart reluctantly introduced his lover to his mother. Not only did Luis feel compassion for Heike and imply that Stewart had done wrong by her, but Luis actually enjoyed her company. Now, years later, during Luis’s visit, Stewart wrestles with whether or not to tell Luis what happened between Heike and himself; he yearns to share his estrangement from his mother, and the circumstances of her death, as well as what he has learned from her letters.

The title to this last story, then, is significant. “Buddy” is a term of endearment, and it was Luis’s nickname for Stewart while they were together; but “Buddy” is also a word used to call dogs or the form of address used by someone who has come to help a stranger, a fellow human being, in difficulty. Stewart is in psychic pain in this story, but he is brave enough to face what he must alone, or at least to let Luis, the man he deeply loved, leave without knowing how much he is suffering. Matthew Lansburgh is a writer whose mind houses labyrinths underground, but also towering cathedrals; even in ruins, they open onto sky.