

HUMANISTIC PURVEYOR

Chet Kozlowski

WHERE THINGS ARE WHEN YOU LOSE THEM

Martin Golan

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It's easy to like the lilt in Martin Golan's writing: his word choices are crisp and his tone effervescent. The twelve stories in his collection *Where Things Are When You Lose Them* snap, crackle, and pop in their examination of modern travails. Suburbia is, for the most part, Golan's milieu, and it's one he negotiates well. His characters tend to be white and affluent, and the rigors of the working day or making ends meet are not such a concern. Rather, Golan takes on matters of the heart in times of testy human behavior. He uses hefty topics—ranging from sexual etiquette to domestic abuse to the grim specter of assisted living—to catapult his people into their moment of reckoning.

Golan's greatest strength shows when the characters talk; he has a fine ear for the way folks express themselves when they're damaged, or trying to break through, or seeking to deflect. His dialogue is economic and his use of dialects and teenage slang, which is no easy thing to render and into which he delves several times, is convincing.

Many of the stories have a straightforward structure: a phrase or image is introduced, used symbolically to counterpoint the action, and then returns to wrap things up in the denouement. The typical narrator is a middle-aged male, looking back at a life-defining episode. This perspective can be poignant, as in "The Shape of Water," in which the protagonist reminisces about a love lost amongst the emotional debris left by swinging couples in the 60s; the stirring image of his lover diving off a boat into the ocean is its central metaphor. "When Annie Fell Off the Mountain" uses its freeze-frame of a woman (also suspended in mid-air) to draw us into a story of unwanted pregnancy in the days before legal abortion, which, despite the gravity of its subject, allows for some dark comedy in the confusion that comes from juggling too many agendas and bad directions.

Golan is most comfortable writing about men. In "The Loneliness of Men," married Jonathan joins his bachelor pal Roger for an uneasy night on

the town at a bar "that smells damply of sex and regret." That footloose Roger is playing the *bon vivant* to deny a grave illness comes as a well-timed surprise that changes the mood of the piece from fratboy frivolity to one of melancholy. The pair of male confidantes in "The Perfect Woman" strolls through a snowy neighborhood by night, ruminating about collapsing marriages. The topic turns to their notion of the ideal woman, a checklist of attributes that reaches its crescendo when they happen upon a woman undressing in a nearby house. They spy on her, undetected, and the story becomes a potent allegory for being outside of life and its rewards.

When Golan writes about women, he's less certain, and the results are often more interesting. "Making Sandwiches" is a wry piece in which Sharon, a housewife, busies herself with the minutiae of everyday life and casual flirtations to buck up her courage for the day's true purpose, when she'll confront her Alzheimer's-afflicted mother with devastating family news to cleanse her own soul. In "The Cicadas are Throbbing," Golan creates heartbreaking empathy for Carolyn, a newly divorced woman who finds herself the social equal to (and rival of) her budding teenage daughter, in a wonderfully volatile situation that the author handles deftly.

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Some of the stories are experimental. The ironically titled "Intimacy" is all dialogue, just cabbies sitting around talking, one fresh from a fare that he may have helped escape the commission of a murder. "Nora, Standing Naked" offers a multi-testimony collage ostensibly about breast cancer that ends up being mostly about, well, breasts. Several characters weigh in on Nora's physical endowments. The various male voices come off as blunt, in contrast to Nora's own, and its revelation that, despite the welcome attention from men, she is more than the sum of her parts.

There are some disappointments along the way. Often the stories have the quality of chronicle, of wanting to get them down rather than contemplate them. They're airtight, more like memoirs than fiction, as if to head off any alternate interpretations. "The Arena," which touches on the major events of a life in the span of a cross-town car ride, is too heavy-handed in its extended metaphor; Golan spells it out as if he's afraid we won't get it. "Tommy Matson's Luck," a modern parable about the anticipation of imminent wealth, suffers from its omniscient narrator: the storyteller and the perfectionist protagonist

are indistinguishable, and that affects the attitude of the piece; Tommy's voice would be much stronger in first person. And for all its virtues, the above-mentioned "Making Sandwiches" ultimately doesn't go deep enough in its disclosure of familial crimes; skimming through the details comes off as a last ditch effort to add heft and social conscience.

But these are quibbles. There are so many gratifying jolts of truth along the way: the sudden understanding about sisterhood that comes to the hapless ex-boyfriend in "Annie Fell Off the Mountain," the despair that settles like a toxic fog over the enabling friend in "The Loneliness of Men"; these revelations are substantial and spot on.

Golan saves the best for last. "Streets of Flowers" is set in a grad-school writing workshop and, despite the stereotypic setting and labeling of the characters (giving them names like "The Aesthete," "The Tie," and "Braless Josie"), takes some real risks, structurally and in its lively study of complexity versus simplicity, and their role in literary pretension. The title story is the gem: in "Where Things are When You Lose Them," a man named Paul must decide whether to remove his dying father from life support. He is tentative and marginalized, leaving the reader truly unnerved by an unpredictable outcome. Paul is Golan's most engaging protagonist, the shmoe we've been waiting for. He artfully plays off scenes with Paul's disaffected teenage son and distracted, cell phone-obsessed brother, to portray a man caught in the middle, and as a result hits just the right balance of the monumental and the mundane. The device here is clean and unforced: a lost credit card as a symbol of mortality.

Martin Golan identifies himself primarily as a journalist. His novel *My Wife's Last Lover* was published in 2000, and several of the stories in *Where Things Are When You Lose Them* have appeared in other forms. While not achieving (or trying for) the quiet wisdom of a John Cheever or Melody Beattie, who worked similar territory, this author is more purveyor than poet, a clear-eyed observer of the human condition, creating believable incidents and sympathetic characters with a neat directness.

Chet Kozlowski lives and writes in New York City, and teaches at The City College of New York and NYU. His stories have appeared in Guernica, The Brooklyn Rail, and Global City Review. He is currently completing his first novel, Kosti's Song.