

Knowing Death

By Philip Bufithis

The Necessary Grace to Fall, by Gina Ochsner (University of Georgia Press, 179 pp., \$24.95).
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If Gina Ochsner's characters once led vital and interesting lives, she does not say. We see them only in their present lusterless condition. In the title story Howard is an investigative assistant at Hope and Life Insurance, seeking hope and life. He feels diminished, emptied out, but if he can put himself in the actual place of a policy holder just before she jumped from a bridge, maybe he can learn from her death something that will redeem him. Can grace accrue from a compact with the dead?

In "What Holds Us Fast" Claire creates ice sculptures for a catering service. They symbolize for her—e.g., Pegasus, a mermaid—romance, escape, though the reader knows what she does not: they also symbolize her cold disposition. Her boring boyfriend and the empty flatlands of Texas have not entrapped her as much as her own delusive aspirations and closed nature. When her ailing grandmother nears death, Claire removes from the freezer "her only perfectly preserved Pegasus," and they watch it melt together. Though Claire has no realizable dream to replace the gone unrealizable dream, her Pegasus, she has at least eliminated from her life the idealizations that hold her fast.

The main character in "How the Dead Live" is about to transcend hopes and dreams. He is a ghost whose ordinary mishaps naturalize him the better for us to identify with him. He lives in his pregnant daughter's house and keeps losing his glasses on the staircase, where his son-in-law steps on them. The Dead Man hates his son-in-law who, like his once mortal self, is an adulterer. If only he can enlighten his unhappy daughter, tell her the truths of life he has come to know through death. But he realizes that even if he could, she would not listen, "preferring instead to own each ache for herself." Unhappiness is undesirable, yet more undesirable is to live without orientation, even if that orientation is pain. The life we have is the life we choose.

"How the Dead Live" is a performance of supra-sensory detail. The Dead Man can smell food going bad before it spoils, clover in geese droppings, infidelity in his son-in-law's excrement containing red meat, which his daughter does not cook but which his son-in-law's lover does. Or is it the odor of colon cancer? The Dead Man hopes so. As his daughter's pregnancy comes closer to term, her thoughts turn to the promise of new life, and he begins to disintegrate because his existence depends on her memory of him.

He feels the wind "thrumming in his bones," his body unravels rib by rib, and he disappears into reality.

In the darkly comic story "Then Returning," Pranas, a Lithuanian gravedigger, also knows about corporeal disintegration. Errant bombing has torn up a cemetery, and for three days he has been digging in muck, trying to retrieve old body parts and new body parts and put each body part with its proper body. He is "beginning to believe that his life is really as simple as mud and water." His girlfriend, Lada, guides German and American tourists through historic Vilnius. "It's important not to upset the Americans," her boss instructs her. Naïve, impatient, Americans are like children. Spoiled, protected by two oceans, they cannot comprehend that the Russian-speaking Finns know twenty words for tragedy. In "Sixty Degrees North," set in Siberia, Laika plays host to the American Polar Bear Club. "They couldn't help themselves, all that money and so much time on their hands. Life was a lark and they were curious." Ochsner's evaluation of Americans in her Lithuanian and Siberian stories resembles Solzhenitsyn's: American intolerance of deprivation and suffering has produced a shallow society.

A blend of cold realism and colder fantasy, "From the Bering Strait" is the last story in this collection. A new Ice Age has swept into the community, Ochsner's correlative for the paralysis—emotional and spiritual—of the unnamed narrator and his wife, Dolores (dolor). Birds get stuck mid-flight in the icy sky; children stop growing; words turn to ice, chip off the tongue, and "look like little slivers of glass" fallen on shoes. These events are the result of what Howard, the insurance investigator in the first story, feared: "Maybe [people] were all forgetting how to live."

With the sensitivity of poetry *The Necessary Grace to Fall* does what most of us avoid or cannot do: it explores death, which, looked at clearly and closely, is not, we learn, so much fearsome as it is profoundly peculiar. Death is the ultimate Other and the breakdown of illusion. These stories are a fresh apprehension of life. Gina Ochsner has given us a brave gift.

Philip Bufithis has been a fiction editor at Antietam Review for fifteen years. His short stories and essays on American literature have appeared in numerous publications.