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FEAR OF BLUE SKIES

By Richard Burgin

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Richard Burgin would be an apt choice to write the epitaph for our vanishing century. At its beginning, when for the first time in history the entire world went to war, Chaucer's sweet-showered April had already become Eliot's cruelest month. At its anxiety-ridden close, for Burgin even the blue skies that songwriters once found smiling at them now inspire fear.

Burgin has always written of the alienated and isolated, those whose stumbling gait has led the path of their lives off course. In his third story collection, though he still writes of the disturbed, the loveless, Burgin focuses less on their aberration and more on the subtle texture of their character. The result is his wisest and deepest work so far.

There's a stabbing pain at the heart of each of these stories, usually because people see love as close enough to touch, yet they reach for it in ineffectual ways.

The 34-year-old woman in the sensitively observed "My Black Rachmaninoff," for example, tries to take her first secure steps into a more aware life following her divorce by approaching the artist who's been playing the elegant piano strains she's heard through her apartment wall. She assumes the pianist to be the soft-spoken black doorman of her building to whom she's already attracted: "His skin is light coffee-colored and his straight hair is combed back in a pompadour and colored a dull reddish brown with golden highlights, as if part of a weird sunset had solidified on his head." But muffled chords through a wall do not always result in two people making beautiful music together.

Similarly, the pathetic poor little rich boy of the title story has grown up without intimacy in his life. He desperately seeks it by showering random acts of kindness on the thieves, prostitutes and vagabonds of Southern California. The disappointing results are no less poignant for being foreordained.

The most painful stories, though, find the source of their protagonists' isolation stemming from uncertain or ulterior groundings in intimacy in their childhood relationships with their parents. The brother and sister of "My Sister's House" found their early lives dominated by seemingly loving parents. But the sinister aftertaste of their parenting has left the sister forever alienated from men and the brother facing middle and old age alone.

Most painful, perhaps, is "The Towel," set in St. Petersburg, which in the simple guise of an adult son's visit to his widowed mother shows through masterful selection of detail and incident how a lifetime of need-driven thrust and parry, even the primal love of mother and child can barely peek through the cracks in their self-protective walls.

In "Brook," the narrator notes a similar distance from her parents: "After all their cold years together in Wisconsin they've sort of grown strangely compatible in their semiavoidance of each other, like two adjacent icicles, relieved their daughters were each getting into trouble a thousand miles away from them."

Though anguished, these stories are seldom hopeless. In "Mistakes," where two men befriend each other and share the stories of the crucial mistakes they've each made that have cost them their best chances at love, and in "The Park," the story of a man whose life has lacked love since his parents died and who tries to find it with an attractive young woman, Burgin shows how the sheer fact of opening ourselves to another can become the first step toward rejoining the human community.

This is an adult collection in the best sense: closely observed, masterfully written, unsentimental explorations of our quest for closeness that all seem to say, "It shouldn't have to be this hard, but somehow it is."