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MAN WITHOUT MEMORY

Richard Burgin

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In "The Victims," one of the best stories in Richard Burgin's strong new collection, a mother describes her son's compulsive behavior to his lifelong friend: "He has hundreds of rituals that he goes through every day. His doctor calls it 'listing.' . . . His doctor calls it a 'rage for order.'"

In this collection, he is typical. Several of Burgin's characters are compulsive "listers," and most of them have a rage for order as they grapple blindly with the disorder and loneliness that govern their lives.

Burgin, professor at Drexel University and editor of the acclaimed literary magazine *Boulevard*, has his finger on the pulse of our times. His characters stray from city to city, weighted rather than buoyed by their educations, groping for meaningful connection to others yet stumbling along in behaviors that ensure isolation. They exhibit the neuroses reflective of our alienated age.

In "Notes on Mrs. Slaughter" the narrator and his paranoid landlady share the delusion that people are following them--she suspects it is the Mafia--to the point where they sleep in the same room for mutual security. Even so, they cannot talk to each other. The female narrator of "The Opposite Girl" is initially so brave that she goes off to New York City to seek her fortune, even living for a while downtown in her car. But her courage erodes in the face of contemporary urban and sexual dangers, particularly AIDS, and by the end she must return to a comforting paternal lap to become Daddy's little girl again.

Burgin's are sensitive characters, but sensitive in unusual or aberrant ways. The narrator of "Notes on Mrs. Slaughter" stands reading a newspaper before an outdoor magazine stand in Harvard Square. "Suddenly, I was overwhelmed by the work that went into producing it, the work that was in it. Afraid of bursting into tears, I quickly put it back on the stand." When a woman picks him up in the Boston Common, invites him to her apartment, disrobes and lies on her bed, he studies her body and notes, "To me the bed post proved much more fascinating, there was so much labor in it, so much time in it." The narrator of "Constitution Day," one of three stories in the collection set in Philadelphia, finds himself brooding "just because I've been suddenly attacked by a little happiness."

The book brims with forlorn drifters. The narrator of "New City" is a college teacher starting at his fourth school and fourth city in six years. A compulsive who

arranges everything in his apartment alphabetically, his loneliness makes him seek out and pay a pretty prostitute just in the hope that being seen with her will establish his image. "It's amazing," he tells us, "how much credibility you get and how much less intimidating the world seems just because you're walking with someone good-looking. People make way for you and gaze at you seriously and almost everything suddenly becomes easier." His goal is to have her walk with him to school on the first day: "Let the kids see that their freshman comp teacher has a really hip-looking girlfriend. Let them see that before I even open my mouth and say a word to them. It would be a good investment in my career."

Though drifting, Burgin's people are heading nowhere. They are too trapped in dysfunctional behaviors. The narrator of "Aerialist" is an acrophobic voyeur who has a mystical experience in a Philadelphia high-rise and becomes a monomaniac. He tries to share this experience with a young woman he had spied on from his previous apartment. She wisely suspects he is delusional and possibly dangerous. The female narrator of the excellent "Carlin's Trio" is another compulsive list-maker. A composer afraid of intimacy, she finds happiness only in the non-threatening friendship of a vacationing couple from whom she can keep equal distance.

The estrangement underlying most of Burgin's characters is well summed up by a writer in "Constitution Day" as he describes a story idea: "Here's the plot. . . . A man grows up convinced that everything that happens in the world is solely for his education and benefit. He believes that God is staging this 'show,' in other words, for him alone. Later he thinks that a few other people have the same fate and that he'll know them when he sees them. Anyway, some of the consequences of his belief system are that he's totally ambivalent about his career because the people who judge his work really only exist to influence his development. It's the same with women. He's afraid of love since the women he meets are also only characters in a play performed for him, with no real destiny of their own."

These characters fear intimacy, yet love and sex become the focus of most stories. "Constitution Day" and "The Victims" are notably similar perceptive studies of the balance between love and hatred in sibling rivalry and male friendship. Erotic tension seeps into almost all of the stories, but usually occurring between brothers, two men, two women or in a stranger searching for a porno movie.

Man without Memory provides a rich blend of consistency and variety. The characters share similar quirks and fears, yet each is differentiated from the others. The settings range from the urban Northeast to St. Petersburg, Florida. All but one story are told in a first-person voice, as urgent voices are one of Burgin's strengths; his narrators, like ancient mariners, grip us by the lapel and make us hear their tales.

Another strength is Burgin's poetic use of metaphor, the way he employs a game of frisbee to show the final relationship of the narrator and vacationing couple of "Carlin's Trio": "I could see them making their moves so clearly, though I couldn't say for certain how many feet away from me they were, or whether we still formed a triangle

or any kind of design. Even the space between us blurred as if it were imaginary," or the way he uses the board games Chinese checkers and Parcheesi in "Notes on Mrs. Slaughter" as images of being hopelessly blocked and "running and hiding and searching for safety."

Skillfully written and acutely attuned to the ways contemporary life can overwhelm the vulnerable personality, this is an impressive group of stories from a mature observer of the modern human condition.