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THE MELANCHOLY OF DEPARTURE

By Alfred DePew

132 pp. Athens, Ga.: Univ. of Georgia Pr. \$19.95.

Mercurial stylistic shifts in Alfred DePew's Flannery O'Connor Award-winning collection suggest an apprentice writer searching for his voice rather than a master who has found it. But if many stories feel like workshop exercises, the best are sensitive studies of loss and survival. The title characters of "Rita and Maxine" are a declining director nearing forty who feels "old and brittle, as though anything could give way now" and a newly repatriated actress whose psyche feels "slightly askew and precariously balanced." Protectively masked by an impromptu Ibsen rehearsal, they, typical of Mr. DePew's characters, learn that empathy, if available at all, lies in unanticipated sources. The witty "Let Me Tell You How I Met My First Husband, the Clown" shows how life's most significant relationships may be those not meant to last. "Stanley," despite a grating second-person viewpoint, sketches a poignant scene of contemporary dating. Its protagonist does not like the smug, irritating man she found in a personals ad, but he drinks so much at dinner that she lets him stay overnight and wonders "why it seems to cost so much to meet a man, to date, to start sleeping with him." After a first sentence that could win the Dark and Stormy Night Competition, "Florence Wearnse" becomes the collection's best story, an elegantly observed account of two World War I-generation sisters, one who married, had children and all the things her culture told her a woman desired, while her spinster sister's life remained quietly her own, right down to choosing when to go conveniently deaf and when to cease breathing. Such stories show Mr. DePew's a future worth watching.