

Small Redemption

By William Sheldon

Book Review:

Somewhere Geese Are Flying: New and Selected Stories, by Gary Gildner.
Michigan State UP, 2004.

Gary Gildner is more widely known for his poetry than his prose, but his fourth collection of short fiction should do much to balance that account. Edith Wharton once remarked that, "If the situation takes the lead, I leave it lying about, as it were, in a quiet place, and wait till the characters creep steadily up and wriggle themselves into it. . . . Then one by one, the people appear and take possession of the case." The stories in *Somewhere Geese Are Flying* work in a similar manner. The reader senses Gildner's knowledge of his characters and his affection for them. Further, the stories' "plots" seem to arise out of the characters' idiosyncrasies, rather than from the machinations of the writer. The one notable exception to this approach is "Pavol Hudák, the Poet, is Talking," but even in this piece, the central story, with its ending worthy of O. Henry, is a frame tale told by Hudák to the narrator. In "Something Special," perhaps the quirkiest of the stories, one character has seemingly disappeared, while another, who was once a private detective, agrees to search for him. However, the reader never sees the search but rather focuses upon the narrator's small epiphany regarding her own feelings of familial belonging.

These sorts of loss and redemption, often small redemptions, constitute a significant motif in the book. The stories treat the losses of lovers and marriages and the deaths of children and parents, but Gildner seems most concerned with small ways in which his characters cope with such tragedies. Witness this conversation, in "Below the Gospels," between the mother and father of a young girl who has died:

"Lenny, what if we were stuck in a huge building like a warehouse surrounded by boxes and sheets and rolls of hot information? And more pouring in every second. We can't move, there's so much. And no windows we can open, no fresh air. We can hardly breathe. Now what? I mean, *now* what do we do?"

"But we're not in such a place," I said.

"We're not, are we."

"We're here."

"In the mountains."

"We can go outside anytime we want," I said.

Thus, in these small acts, do Gildner's characters find their ways.

Gildner writes in the introduction that the stories span time, with the first written in 1978, but also place, in that the pieces were written in "Michigan, Paris, Iowa, Slovakia, Oregon, Greece, Idaho, and on the Isle of Skye." That sort of movement seems to inform the stories in this volume as well. One character, bereft at the death of his daughter, leaves his wife behind, taking a bus for Mexico. Partway there, he turns around hitching to Denver, from which he rides a bus to Des Moines, then a plane to Chicago, and then another to Midland, Michigan. There he rents a car in an attempt to find his wife, whom he fears is grief stricken and wandering on foot, in a blizzard, in the Michigan woods.

Thrasher (whose name suggests restlessness), a character in "The Roots of Western Civilization," finds himself in Greece with a woman half his age, whom he fears losing to a richer, younger man. At one point, Thrasher stands in the stadium at Delphi, feeling "good . . . in the sun on a field used for sports." He remembers his youth: "And when you went up to hit, your hands were sweating good, the bat feeling so sweet, you knew where you were, and you knew what was next." Thrasher appears again, in the title story, which moves between his Paris encounter sharing drinks with a wino and an attempt, back in the States, at reconciling with his ex-wife, Barbara. At one point Barbara tells him "I'm going to kiss you now, Thrasher. Hold still"; he answers, "I can't." As Gildner creates

dramatic tension between loss and redemption, he builds a similar tension between restlessness and sense of place.

Still, throughout the stories, Gildner remains most interested in Faulkner's notion of "the human heart in conflict with itself." His characters rarely reach clear-cut resolutions but find narrow ways in which to cope with the vagaries of life. *Somewhere Geese Are Flying* presents 17 stories with memorable characters, and because those characters seem so realized, the reader believes in them and roots for them, perhaps as much as their creator does.