

# Language Stampedes

By Scott Bryan Wilson

Book Reviews:

*I Looked Alive: Stories*, by Gary Lutz. Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003.

*Vanishing Point*, by David Markson. Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004.

Gary Lutz's fiction is both tribute to the grand elegance of contemporary masters—Cormac McCarthy, Thomas Pynchon—and a thousand-yard stare past them. In sustained and intricate prose, the 23 stories that comprise *I Looked Alive* encompass aspects of human isolation, loneliness, and unhappiness—from failed relationships to successful ones to dreary jobs to family deaths.

Each piece concerns characters who are the “lonelily unalone,” rooting to get to the core of their isolation, though never to understand it—only to be complacent in it or to perfect it. Heartbreak saturates every clause, though even the stories with hope—“Uncle,” “The Boy,” “All Told”—are heavily crosshatched with impending dread and solitude. One man hopes to “get [his] loneliness finally right”; a single mother convenes a “fatherless full-house family assembly”; a son comes home to be the “butt of [his] mother’s love.” Other characters fret over how they can retrieve bits of loved ones left behind and embodied in germs on a bar of soap, or dead skin flakes on an old towel. Others squirm (or don’t) during any combination of stunted interactions with family or lovers.

It would be futile—and misleading—to sum up these stories, as every one in the collection lays out its subject matter in the first few sentences—sometimes innocuously—only to sprawl out like a Steve Vai guitar solo full of precise tinkering and experimentation, ending nowhere near where it started.

Every sentence feels like it has a week’s worth of work in it—not a word out of place—and to a slight degree, it seems that this may be the one small fault of the collection. On occasion, the narratives

suffer because of the attention paid to the prose. Even so, the tremendous elephant-stampede of language should be enough to guide the intrepid reader past the few bumpy spots.

*I Looked Alive* is Lutz's first book since his 1996 collection, *Stories in the Worst Way*, reissued last year by Third Bed. In a collection under 200 pages, the dense, perfect prose seems excuse enough for the delay.

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Reading recent David Markson novels reminds one of watching *Road Runner* cartoons: The same thing happens in every episode, but it's a great episode. On the surface, *Vanishing Point*, in style and content, does not vary from Markson's two most recent works, *Reader's Block* and *This Is Not a Novel*. Characters called Reader and Writer, respectively, narrated the two previous novels, while Author—a man on the verge of death, reluctantly succumbing to old age—narrates *Vanishing Point*. Author tries to put his two shoeboxes of notecards in some order so he can type up his novel, which becomes what he calls a “seminonfictional semifiction.”

Here, Markson returns to Markson-like territory, as he begins to catalogue anecdote upon anecdote about living as an artist, and mostly the bad stuff. Everyone from Xenophon to Jane Austen to William Gaddis makes an appearance, as facts about their lives (real and imagined) are subject to Author's attention. These tiny historical blurbs, presented as facts, avoid dissection. Markson creates a narrative collage out of the hopelessly picayune—“Arnold Shoenberg's father was a shoemaker”—to the endlessly fascinating—“Laurence Sterne's love letters to his mistress: Which he sometimes copied word for word from letters he had earlier written to his wife”—to subtly but mercilessly dissing Jonathan Franzen. The money problems, the public neglect, the madness, the gossip from the 15th century—Markson covers it all.

While these remarks appear interchangeable with those in *Reader's Block* and *This Is Not a Novel*, Markson's core subject matter

departs from those works. Although the suicides and manners of death of famous artists were the bulk of the previous works, *Vanishing Point* obsesses over where and at what time these artists died, as Author himself becomes increasingly aware of his own age.

A sense of political outrage permeates the text. Scattered among the artistic stuff smolders fury at atrocities committed by groups of people against other groups of people: Muslims against women, terrorists against the United States, Nazis against any number of offended groups. Though rare, these moments resonate as strongly as the gossip.

Author himself tries to remain hidden much of the time, disappearing for pages on end, but his tiny clots of narrative—which, when strung together, might account for 10 pages of the novel—are effective and affecting. Author seems to know that for him, death prowls around the corner, and he struggles with his confusion and sadness about this. Considering the small percentage of space the framing narrative receives, of the three recent books, this one has the strongest arc and the most emotion. One finds oneself concerned with Author's bumping into walls and lapses in memory. The cataloging of death locations becomes haunting; Author's obsessions become more and more visible as the book spirals toward the end.