

## Time and Other Truths

By Catherine Browder

Book Review:

*Escape into the Sea: Stories*, by Donn Irving. Carnegie Mellon, 2007.

When Donn Irving died suddenly in February 2007, at age 73, he was looking forward to the appearance of his first full-length story collection. He'd come late to writing fiction, weaving it into a career as a veterinarian. He was, in fact, a prolific writer, widely published in small magazines and two chapbooks. The 12 stories in *Escape into the Sea* offer a cross-section of Irving's work, from jaunty veterinarian tales, with his trademark self-deprecating humor, to weightier stories on masculine foibles and desires. Death figures in them all; we find it standing in broad daylight or lurking in shadows. Irving's male narrators are all too aware of time running out.

Taken as a group, these stories remind us of how few fiction writers are veterinarians—memoirist James Herriot notwithstanding. Irving brings in animal science and pharmacology, and we are aware of learning things we hadn't known before: animal drugs, diseases and healing procedures, farm lingo that embraces a specialist's knowledge of air and soil and water, sheep and cattle. The language of science feeds Irving's imagination, and we are entertained throughout the collection by his love of words. Not lean or wimpy words, either, but *le mot juste*: Irving never met a Latinate word he could not use.

The veterinarian stories tend to rely on irony in the face of mishap. While these are witty, and we delight in their word play, I found the non-vet stories more engaging and inventive, particularly "The Golden Age of Jazz," "His Own Sun," "The Underbelly," the title story, and "Robbed"—a fish story with more on its mind.

Even though Irving was noted for his love of jazz, "The Golden Age of Jazz" could be considered *sui generis* in his body of work.

There is nothing else like it. Here, Irving introduces a large cast of black jazz musicians and barflies. They all size up a visiting white trombonist, "with a last name that sounds like some kind of bladder ailment," who's come to jam with the Pannonica musicians. The individual voices, attitudes, and banter are convincing. Since the great triumph of the story is its multiple points of view, it is especially poignant that the only mind we do not enter belongs to the white musician.

The narrator of "His Own Sun" is a pathologist and university professor who, at 58, has taken up walking, "seeking purpose. An elusive thing, purpose." His medical students bore him, and he has begun to compare them to the notorious Willie Sutton:

Safecracker and gent, who, when asked why he continued the practice, replied: "Because that's where the money is. . . ." To call those faces that ring him round in the morning amphitheatre expressive is to commit undue kindness upon them.

Walden worries about an old colleague who is losing his sight. Meanwhile, Walden is being prodded by another old colleague and friend, Sandy, who believes Walden is unwell. Perhaps depressed. How could he be otherwise? A pathologist lives with death. Indeed, as Walden observes, lecturing on cancer cells,

[D]isorder is the only excitement. *Raison d'être*. It is the thing you look forever to single out. . . . Until you learn it is indeed a carcinoma, horribly hungry and already metastasized . . . in a little girl of six.

What shines in this story of a man considering his mid-life "options" is Irving's capacity for observation and truth telling. Much is *told* in this ruminative tale, brilliantly told, bringing to mind Francine Prose's recent scorn for the platitudinous advice to "show, don't tell." Irving's writing reminds us that there is nothing wrong with telling. The key, of course, is knowing how to tell well and, in so doing, deepen a story. This Irving knows how to do.

The grim but dazzling title story, "Escape into the Sea," follows

a similar strategy, equally reflective in style. Set in the psych ward of a hospital, a one-time dairy farmer is being treated for chronic skin ulcers (and a suicide attempt), the result of a hideous mishap that poisoned his herd and his family. Narrator Gerrit gives up his secret grudgingly, moving from hospital to the past event and back again. By this method, Irving gives the oft-despised flashback new dignity, for the movement back and forth in time forms the fabric of the story. When we consider the details of the past accident or the present hospital setting and Gerrit's plans for himself, we cannot imagine the story structured in any other way. We'd be unable to endure or believe it otherwise. Although the narrator's voice is wry in the present—poking fun at his hospital helper, Gene—controlled rage and sorrow surface as he recounts the poisoning and the fate of his family.

One can't go any further without mentioning Irving's skill in rendering a landscape. He intuits that the power of setting involves tone and mood. *Escape into the Sea* takes place in Michigan, and the narrator writes, "Cows are in my lake-slate clouded dreams of drear, cold Michigan. . . ." Later, he remarks on, "the rare Michigan sunlight freed from the Great Flannel Sky-Weaver of Lake Michigan's western shore."

The most memorable passage takes place over the by-ways of Iowa and Missouri, in "The Woman Who Painted Asparagus."

The land George plies with the Subaru wagon . . . nose down like a beagle's . . . is not humpy and bedraggled as a wormy steer like Pittsfield's. It's nonetheless poor, churned by eons of moldboard and disk plows until, as with a cement mixer, the stones rise to the top. The silt slithered off into rich rivulets no one can farm. Undulating land, farmsteads distinguished by quads of spire-like junipers for windbreaks. The wind is incessant. A place where women run off with other men's wives more often than with other men, that's how sere this land, and the Sunday preachers who are Maytag men all week dig themselves even deeper trying to explain God's will on Sundays. It's land where relevance itself is at stake.

It needs to be said (with one notable exception), women do not fare well in Irving country. As wives, they are dull or acrimonious or somehow distant. We do not see much through their eyes or hear the pain in their voices. Their point of view is unavailable. Also, in at least two stories a familiar old trope appears: middle-aged man falls for dishy girl half his years, and turns the subject of his lust into an object.

These are masculine stories, after all. What they have to offer, which is plenty, is a generosity of spirit for the foibles of men folk. Even when they are cynical or joking, his narrators seldom back away from hard truths. The language is rich in literary allusions, natural science, and metaphor. Reading these tales, we are conscious of smiling in recognition, ever grateful for the subtle humor that informs them.

Those of us who can still call up Donn Irving's voice will miss it.