

## Love, Violence, & Masculinity

By Sharon McGill

Book Review:

*Refresh, Refresh*, by Benjamin Percy. Graywolf Press, 2007.

**B**lood flows in *Refresh, Refresh*, Benjamin Percy's second collection of stories. It surges from the throats of slaughtered pigs, then pools around the scene of a human death—such as the camping tent that resembles “an organ excised by blunt scissors” after a bear has mauled its occupants. Even a refrigerator bleeds, oozing red lines upon the kitchen floor on a hot, August afternoon. Strangely, these moments of gore do not seem as disturbing as the distant, bloodless deaths and other unseen threats—like a father's suicidal fantasies, or a rapist stalking his brother's wife. In his first collection, *The Language of Elk* (Carnegie Mellon U Press, 2006), Percy's tales of elk hunting, frontier living, and men (and women) with beards tackled myths of the West and masculine identity in darkly comic style. *Refresh, Refresh* portrays the contemporary American male to illustrate how war, isolation, and anxiety can as easily produce a man in touch with his feelings as make him a killer.

Like *The Language of Elk*, Percy casts *Refresh, Refresh* in the high desert of central Oregon east of the Cascades, a volcanic setting suited to the slow malice that builds in every story. In the Pushcart-Prize winning opening piece, “Refresh, Refresh,” the small town of Tumalo has lost most of its men to the Iraq war. Josh and Gordon, high school friends whose fathers have shipped off, bide their time by hunting, boxing, or taunting the local Marine recruiter. Josh's story typifies that of countless American sons—a fact underscored by the frequent use of *we* when Josh fantasizes about his father's activities in Iraq: “We imagined them doing heroic things. Rescuing Iraqi babies from burning huts. Sniping suicide bombers before they could detonate on a crowded street.” The power of

this piece resides in the candor with which Percy renders the boys' shifting emotional landscape—as when, upon discovering the death of a fellow classmate's father, Josh states: "Hearing about this, we felt bad for all of ten seconds. Then we felt good because it was his father and not ours." Even as their fathers' continued absence haunts them, the ferocity of war seems to seep into Josh and Gordon, pushing the boys toward reckless extremes and the story's breathless, brutal climax.

These 10 tales never lack for external hazards—such as wars, storms, nuclear apocalypse and even Bigfoot—but the real danger lurks within. In "The Caves of Oregon," a young couple buys a house above the entrance to a lava tube—a cave complete with bones, far-off moaning, dead dogs, and thousands of bats. Yet the more frightening void exists between Kevin and Becca, themselves, and the emotional gap they try to heal. Jim in "The Killing" is a loving father and grandfather—as well as a reticent mountain man who keeps his amputated foot in a bucket of formaldehyde and takes shots of Jack Daniels from the barrel of a revolver. While the plot is fairly predictable, "The Killing" shines in its details. Both the visceral descriptions of sinister things and Percy's rendering of ordinary moments simmer with both love and violence. Such intensity bristles in a scene where Jim imagines sharing breakfast with his daughter and grandson the morning after he has shot a man:

[Jim] will read his newspaper and fold it precisely with every turn of the page. He will sip from a mug of coffee—the coffee steaming in his hand like a gun recently fired—until it is just porcelain against his teeth. And his daughter will splash it full of coffee again. And she will cook him eggs, over hard. And the boy will ask him a question and he will answer it with a gruffness that belies the smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

Like a hunter, Percy knows what to watch and listen for; his stories offer only the sharpest, most revealing sensory clues to his characters.

While disturbing sentiments weave throughout the book (many of Percy's men are either homicidal, suicidal, or both), the final piece,

“When the Bear Came” offers hope. In this story, Percy returns to Tumalo. The narrator is another fatherless boy, Daniel, who finds a way not only to name his particular fear, but to bait and attack it—even if that fear happens to be a killer bear of human-like intelligence. “When the Bear Came” is the perfect culmination of Percy’s book. Its definition of masculinity lies between “the absolute power that goes along with exercising death” and the loneliness of an abandoned son. The story defines what Percy does best: It explores the complicated mechanism of the male heart—and gets the blood pumping.