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## New Frontier of Minimalism

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Yet under the humor is the truth that domestication is often at the heart of marriage, a domestication that miniaturizes the wife, keeping her in a permanent state of girlhood, hanging gauzy curtains and Christmas lights to dress up the house that cages her, disguising it as something fun.

In “A Garibaldi Tale,” the narrator invokes language rather than lights to cope with the role society’s assigned her. Partially deaf with webbed toes, labeled “simple,” “the child with few concerns,” she is blended into the persona of her deaf, web-toed aunt, and the two of them are referred to collectively as “Auntie and Auntie.” Left out of the fishing and working life at the docks, the girl acts out narratives of femininity in rhymes she pens herself. After her sister overhears her professing her love about a boy

who sells cheese, she realizes that she doesn’t love the boy but rather the sound of words about him. She has been taught to desire this construction of language, which posits a girl yearning after a boy. When another boy, “a nicer boy,” finds her in a shed and they have sex, readers realize how misleading this narrative is. Bernheimer writes, “I laid down the burlap sack and kissed him. Then some other things happened. Though the things were unfamiliar they caused no harm.” The nonchalance used to describe her first sexual experience is disorienting. That the girl describes herself as a voiceless fish at the end of the story speaks volumes. And to extend the metaphor just a bit further, take the title, “Garibaldi,” the girl’s town, which takes its name from a type of fish whose male members boldly attack anything that comes near

the female or her eggs.

In *Horse, Flower, Bird*, Bernheimer’s fourth book, femininity is portrayed as a series of traumas shaped by language. Despite its playful packaging, this book recalls the grim cautionary messages of old-world fairy tales. Bernheimer’s message? “[B]e careful what you read.”

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# NEW FRONTIER OF MINIMALISM

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## FURTHER ADVENTURES IN THE RESTLESS UNIVERSE

Dawn Raffel

Dzanc Books

<http://www.dzancbooks.org>

100 pages; paper, \$14.95

A critic’s conundrum: the book that’s easy to praise but hard to describe. Consider for instance Dawn Raffel’s new collection of stories, *Further Adventures in the Restless Universe*. I can say confidently that it’s difficult to imagine this sort of thing done better—indeed, two or three of the pieces strike me as nothing short of masterful—but to put a name to what she’s doing remains desperate work. Of course labels exist, in the reviewer’s lexicon. “Minimalist” is the brand that tends to get respect, since it’s worn by the likes of Raymond Carver, but the designation remains awfully loose, and comparisons to Carver would badly misrepresent Raffel. On the other hand, newer nomenclature like “short-shorts” seems worse, a mere pet name. Nor am I comfortable working up some fresh coinage, like “fiction of the resonant ellipsis,” since the definition would take up half the review at least. The emphasis here must be on Raffel’s new contribution, worth celebrating whatever its category.

*Further Adventures* runs a scant hundred pages, and a few of its fictions take up less than one of those. The opener, “Near Taurus,” comprises just twenty lines of print, in eleven paragraphs, with three brief quotations. Yet “Near Taurus” relates a tale recognizable to any lover who fumbled his or her initial play at passion. Indeed, these few remaining bones from an unconsummated teen romance are arranged for their mythic association. It opens with a variation on “once upon a time”—“After the rains had come and gone...”—and then ends with both fable and weather, closing the circle—“our naked eyes turning to legends, the dirt beneath us parched.”

The best of these *Adventures* all share this magic, making immensities appear out of next to nothing. If that staple of commercial fiction, the multigenerational family saga, can dance on the head of a pin, then that’s just what’s happening in a story like “The Interruption.” The piece has no less a sweeping historical canvas than the Holocaust, but the references are glancing, indeed. The whole story’s a phone conversation, between sisters, the

American descendants of a destroyed *shtetl*, but the worst tragedy of the previous century is reduced to the following, which at least is of one of the longest utterances from either protagonist:

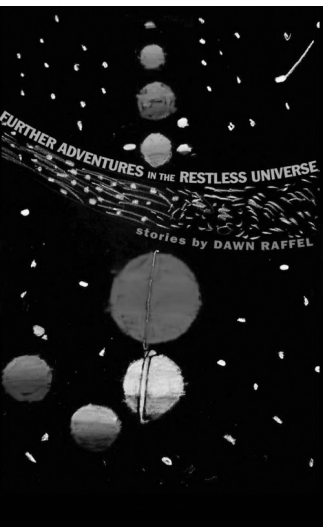
This was all before the war. Meanwhile, the cousin said—meanwhile the lover who’d left her married someone else and had a family with her. Of course—you know. The lover, the children—none of them survived. And now that I think of it, the family in Poland...what?

That last question, more’s the irony, refers to the eponymous “Interruption,” a call coming in on another line. The sisters here are trying to connect despite a twenty-first-century American threat to family, less dramatic but still destructive. The story’s last line, with a finger “on the button,” is “Forgive me.”

*One notes the absence of regular rhythm, still the secret heartbeat of nearly all poetry.*

Along with stories like “Our Heaven,” “The Interruption” helps to sketch a family-saga structure for the whole of these *Adventures*. The opener is that fairy tale of first love (yet lacking in sensuality, beyond the feel of grave-dirt), all move by fits and starts to some momentary reassertion of family (even when you’re about to put family on Hold), and the closer, “Beyond All Blessing and Song, Praise and Consolation,” features a big middle-American family get-together, with three or four generations around the table and ghost-quotation from the verse on the Statue of Liberty (though the story’s Earth Mother dies, and conclusion’s rich with prevarication: “We cannot look. We cannot but look”). Raffel’s toolkit is so spare, her constructions leave plenty of gaps, and into these rush clusters of ambiguity. In particular, the abbreviated exchanges between mothers and sons teeter on the verge of collapse into permanent dysfunction. Still, despite the threats in its offers of dessert or a toy, the hiccups in its sweet-talk, *Further Adventures* may be best seen as a striking new constellation put together from the scattered pieces of our country’s diasporic families.

Speaking of constellations—and note: Raffel



turns up her title in a story set mostly in Chicago’s Adler Planetarium—it’s the distance between the stars, the narrative gaps, that most usefully distinguish this minimalism from that of most Americans struggling under the trademark. Carver’s most famous piece, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” needs every one of its phatic conversational fills; as the title implies, the work must pick over every inch of our talk in order to glean its most cutting shards. But these *Adventures* leave out many more hems and haws than Carver would (or

Beattie, or Mary Robison...), and it never develops a scene so fully as the liquid dinner of “What We Talk.” Quite the opposite, one of Raffel’s most impressive pieces, “Seven Spells,” is all about the *holes* in the narrator’s experience: her fainting spells. The numbered episodes subsume dialog into a concussed summary, yet this same fractured streamlining adds flavor to the experience, heightening the vitality by underscoring its fragility. Not for nothing is the last phrase “the uses of salt.”

Other elements set her minimalism apart, such as the pronounced elements of legend and fable. What matters more, in the end, is how this sharply cornered storytelling cuts to what Flannery O’Connor called “the nature and aim of fiction.” In particular, Raffel’s work raises questions about the distinction between fiction and poetry. Story after story depends on subtle verbal manipulations like that of poetry, a word at the end that rings off a phrase from the start, and the stops and starts can suggest stanza breaks, more about development of an image than increments in narrative movement or psychological penetration. Well then, what defines Raffel’s endeavors as fiction, other than typography and layout? The question, as she frames it, presents no easy answer. Certainly, one notes the absence of regular rhythm, still the secret heartbeat of nearly all poetry. Certainly, a few stories, such as “Coeur,” have more character-based conflict and growth than most poetry. But by and large the ambiguities that pervade and enliven this collection extend to the very form the work claims, they clear new ground for that form, and if you ask me, that’s the most exciting of these *Adventures*.

*John Domini reviews often for ABR. His most recent novel is A Tomb on the Periphery. See <http://www.johndomini.com>.*