

*Dog Run Moon* by Callan Wink

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Reviewed by Melanie White

The magnificent scale of the American West – snow-capped mountains, lunar rock fields, grasslands washed by rain to electric-green – tends to dominate that literary genre, from Pam Houston to Annie Proulx. However, Callan Wink delineates interior landscapes even more than the West’s awe-inspiring outer ones.

The stories in Wink’s debut collection, *Dog Run Moon*, showcase writing as clear as an alpine river, with the same surprising depths and changes of current. In the title story, a steel worker in a Montana town (the kind of place where Wink himself works as a fishing guide) steals a neglected dog and ends up pursued by its owner across moonlit rocks. Wink’s deceptively simple style and plotting appear to set up obvious conclusions – in this case, that the thief is in for a beating – but the unexpected outcomes chime with characters’ unearthed emotions to resonate with deep significance. The way all of these stories fire on twin engines of meaning is the collection’s greatest strength.

Above all, Wink is an insightful writer. His language doesn’t sing so much as Chinese whisper; seemingly simple imagery or innocuous acts develop complex associations that drive home the beauty, poignancy and existential truths of many of the tales. In “Runoff”, one of the book’s most affecting stories, Wink foreshadows the demise of a “beta male” in the image of a steadily swelling river, which threatens to engulf him literally and figuratively. “One More Last Stand” conflates General Custer’s Last Stand with the character’s seven-year affair with a Native American woman: a one-night stand that turned into another, then another, until he isn’t sure whether it’s an affair or a marriage. When his lover leans over him, “her hair folded like black wings around them” – a lovely image, in itself, but imbued with greater power given other details: the raven’s feather in her hair; Native American heritage and the sad spectacle of its reenactment for tourists; the sense of doom, as the spectre of the main character’s ailing wife looms.

The stories where violence takes centre stage rather than stalks the sidelines are perhaps less effective, as with “Breatharians”, about a boy whose father charges him with killing cats. Regardless of the execution, however, all of Wink’s characters are burdened with inner pain, unspoken and not yet understood. Their actions are an expression of this suffering, often roaming geographically (like the listless teacher in “Exotics” who takes a summer job in Texas, tending a hunting ranch full of African beasts) or across decades in pursuit of understanding, as in the final story, “In Hindsight”, with its young widow, Laura, too paralysed by indecision to determine the course of her own life.

“That’s how it had always gone for her,” Wink writes of Laura, “one fortuitous turn of events followed by equal or greater amounts of heartache and tragedy.” Much like these extremely accomplished stories.