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Democracy Dies in Darkness

A portrait of America in three gritty, candid and imaginative collections

Review by Elizabeth Lund

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Tap Out

Many of the people in Edgar Kunz’s gritty, insightful debut are in tough spots: men trapped in difficult, physical jobs, teens playing with a gun, young adults battling despair or addiction. Some are able to tap out, or escape, before they are seriously hurt. Others don’t, and irreparably damage themselves and their loved ones. At the heart of “Tap Out” (Mariner) is the difficult relationship between Kunz and his abusive, alcoholic father, who was heroic only in his own made-up stories. As the speaker explains in one poem, he has spent years measuring the distance between the past and the memories that haunt him, including “The three thousand miles/ between San Francisco/ and the town where the shadows/ of my brothers grow tall./ The cash I don’t wire,/ the numbers I don’t dial./ The marriage that didn’t survive/ the summer.”

Magical Negro

In her third collection, “Magical Negro” (Tin House), Morgan Parker continues to fearlessly explore what it means to be a black woman in the United States today. Like Terrance Hayes, Parker draws on pop culture, current events and history to inform these poems, providing various backdrops and foils that help her challenge stereotypes and define her own complex, nuanced ideas. “I know the world is dangerous/ Everyone tells me sorry,” she notes in one poem. In another, “The hunted must be clever. The hunted has two primary/ tools of survival: imagination and hyperbole.” Bold and edgy, the writing spotlights the strength and tenacity that enable the speaker to survive grief and inequity. It also gives voice to her disappointments and delights as she claims — and proclaims — agency over her body and her life.

Deaf Republic

Ilya Kaminsky's cutting-edge second collection, "Deaf Republic" (Graywolf), presents a sweeping drama about a fictional town where residents are oblivious to the military occupation around them. This continues until a deaf boy is murdered, and the people rebel by pretending they can't hear the commands of the soldiers. Kaminsky, who is hard of hearing himself, uses each poem to advance a story that is broken into two parts. Each act focuses on key characters who deal with personal challenges as the occupiers become more threatening. In the poem "Soldiers Aim at Us," for example, a character named Alfonso cradles his wife's body, vowing that "Tonight/ we don't die and don't die." As these stories unfold, they contribute to the larger narrative arc, and they parallel that of Kaminsky's own family, who fled Ukraine in the early 1990s.

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Elizabeth Lund writes about poetry every month for The Washington Post.

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