**Flash Fiction**

How Stuart Dybek, a master of the short story, captures elusive memories and moments

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Eleven years have passed since *I Sailed With Magellan*, Stuart Dybek’s third story collection, but readers of *McSweeney’s*, *The New Yorker*, *Playboy*, and *Tin House*—readers, for that matter, of the *Indiana Review*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *The Literarian*, *Image*, *Monkey Business*, *The Nervous Breakdown*, *Jelly Bucket*, and nearly every other literary journal published on the continent—know that Dybek has not been idle. The pressure has been building for more than a decade, and the dam has now broken with the simultaneous publication of two very different new collections, a virtuosic and occasionally addling torrent of short fiction by one of the form’s living masters. Technically these collections contain 59 short stories, but given the nature of Dybek’s style, that number seems a gross understatement.

Writers are like runners: each has an optimal distance. There are marathoners (Proust, Musil, Mailer, Pynchon, Vollmann); middle-distance runners, whose novels rarely stray far from the standard 300-page finish line (Highsmith, Weldon, Auster); and sprinters (Simenon, Salinger, Lydia Davis, Donald Antrim). But length isn’t everything. Kurt Vonnegut and Mark Twain were sprinters who wrote novels—novels that are thinly disguised story collections. Dickens wrote enormous novels that tend to be compendiums of middle-distance novels shuffled together. Alice Munro is a long-distance runner who squeezes novelistic narratives into short stories.

Stuart Dybek is a sprinter—if not the Usain Bolt of the short story, then at least the form’s Justin Gatlin. His best race is the two-pager. More than a third of the stories in *Ecstatic Cahoots* are that length or less, and only a handful are more than five pages. The shortest is the first story, “Misterioso,” which I quote in full:

“You’re going to leave your watch on?”

“You’re leaving on your cross?”

This exchange, or a permutation of it, appears, in different contexts, in several of the stories in *Ecstatic Cahoots*. It’s a gimmick, but a gimmick consistent with Dybek’s general approach, which is to string together distinct and apparently unrelated episodes under the heading of a single story, like a jeweler stringing a chain through different stones, some glittering and some dull, some exotic and some mundane, to create a necklace unlike any that has existed. Of the two new volumes, *Paper Lantern* is the more substantial and more satisfying, with nearly every story longer than the stories collected in *Ecstatic Cahoots*. The reading experience is similar, however, because Dybek rarely sustains a single narrative for very long. His longer stories resemble miniature short-story collections.

“Tosca,” “Blowing Shades,” and “Oceanic” are extreme examples of this approach. Each is made up of numerous episodes that have little obvious connection with one another. “Tosca” begins with a hooded man facing a firing squad. Unlike Ambrose Bierce in “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” or Borges in “The Secret Miracle,” Dybek does not take us inside the man’s head, but instead enters the thoughts of the soldiers as they imagine what the man is thinking. A corporal pictures a scene between the man and the man’s lover in a Chicago apartment, near the L tracks; soon we find ourselves in a stone cottage near Lucca, where the two lovers hear an accordionist playing a Puccini aria. Before we know it, we’re back at the execution, where it becomes clear that the scene is in fact occurring on a stage, during a performance of Puccini’s *Tosca*, and the soldiers are extras. Or is this just another fantasy?

Abruptly we are introduced to a first-person narrator, who tells the story of his relationship with a man who “was living his life like an opera.” From there, it’s a short hop to an account of the narrator’s affair with a woman named Iris, which leads to an anecdote about Clair, another lover, who was an ensemble member of a fledgling theater called Cahoots … and all but one of those episodes, any of which could serve as its own, self-contained story, are resolved before the halfway point of the 19-page story. Nearly a dozen additional micro-stories follow in turn before the hooded man is executed. It’s an impressive, if arid, feat of legerdemain: the transitions are seamless, so seamless that by the time you realize you’ve traveled from one episode to a second, you’re already in a third.

In *Ecstatic Cahoots*, Dybek carries the blurring even further, as many of the stories seem, at least upon first glance, to be continuations of the previous story. “I Never Told This to Anyone,” to take one example, is a fantastical story about a miniature bride and groom who appear on the narrator’s windowsill at night. The following story, “Fridge,” begins, “At midnight the expedition of the bride and groom arrives at the Fridge.” But these are a different bride and groom … perhaps. This gesture toward continuity—like the reappearance in multiple stories of the same characters, phrases, and images (moonlight, mirrors, ice)—makes it difficult to determine whether *Ecstatic Cahoots* is actually one long story, or 50 short stories, or several hundred. Trying to track all the connections between the stories can be maddening; it is also, ultimately, pointless. There are enough overlapping symbols and motifs to establish that they have been placed intentionally, though not enough to establish any deeper meaning, apart from giving the reader a general sense of Dybek’s personal fascinations.

The most-powerful stories, the majority of which appear in *Paper Lantern*, are bound with stronger thread. “Seiche,” “If I Vanished,” “Waiting,” and “Paper Lantern” each follow a single character who, pursuing the divagations of memory, travels between different episodes from his past. The internal logic is more cohesive here, for these stories imitate the way memory works, with one thought leading to another through the portal of a familiar image, emotion, texture, or scent. The collection’s title story begins in a laboratory where the narrator and his colleagues are building a time machine—something of an inside joke, since most of Dybek’s stories are their own time machines, transporting us across vast distances of space-time in a single line break. The scientists go to a nearby Chinese restaurant for dinner. During their free-ranging conversation, one of them blithely asks whether anyone remembered to turn off the Bunsen burner. Returning to their laboratory, they see with horror that it has been consumed by flames. This sends the narrator’s mind careening toward the past:

And I remember how, in what now seems another life, I watched fires as a kid—sometimes fires that a gang of us, calling ourselves the Matchheads, had set.

But this is not a story about the Matchheads. Memory is not random; it gathers around moments of emotional significance, particularly emotional trauma:

I remember how, later, in another time, if not another life, I once snapped a photograph of a woman I was with as she watched a fire blaze out of control along a river in Chicago. She was still married then.

It is only here, on the fifth page of a story about time-machine scientists, Chinese food, fortune cookies, and fires, that the narrator introduces his main subject: his failed relationship with a married woman many years earlier.

That relationship disintegrates on an autumn trip to Chicago during a sullen weekend that they spend arguing. At the end of the weekend, as they’re leaving the city, they see a factory burning on the riverbank, and stop to watch. Later, on the dark drive back home to Iowa, the woman interrupts the silence between them to say that their trip, though disastrous, was worth it if only for the spontaneous, exhilarating minutes they spent watching the burning factory:

“I had this sudden awareness,” she continues, “of how the moments of our lives go out of existence before we’re conscious of having lived them. It’s only a relatively few moments that we get to keep and carry with us for the rest of our lives. Those moments *are* our lives. Or maybe it’s more like those moments are the dots and what we call our lives are the lines we draw between them, connecting them into imaginary pictures of ourselves.”

This is a nice description of Dybek’s method. In his best stories, entire lives emerge like constellations from the surrounding darkness, with memory tracing the connections between a few bright, glittering moments.

Because Dybek’s characters often find themselves grasping at memories, trying to catch them before they vanish into oblivion, his stories tend to be suffused by mourning, melancholy, and disappointment. In “Ice,” a woman is haunted by a vision she has of a dead girl holding a candle, staring up through the ice of a frozen pond. The woman’s lover tries to calm her down by pointing out that she’s not dead, but alive, standing beside him. “Who knows for how long?” she responds. “Someday I may be looking back on being in love, and which me will be more real?”

*Paper Lantern*’s subtitle is *Love Stories*, but nearly all the stories in *Ecstatic Cahoots* are love stories too. In one sense, every story Dybek writes is a love story. You feel this love in the exquisite attention to detail—in the icy water that “tasted faintly metallic, of rust or moonlight,” in the sound of men lifting a rain gutter from a pickup truck, like “a meteor shower rattling against [a] metal awning,” in the bank of a river that “bunches like a fabric pulled out of shape by a loose thread.” Dybek’s stories remind us that everything we know, and everything we love, is constantly vanishing, slipping through our fingers. Dybek, with the anxiety of an anthropologist, seems determined not to let this happen, even though he understands, better than most writers do, that it must.

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