

# THE SECRET GOLDFISH

BY DAVID MEANS

CENTRAL QUESTION: *How vulnerable are we to bewilderingly random, perverse twists of fate?*

“I don’t want anyone to die in my stories anymore,” begins a story in David Means’s previous collection, *Assorted Fire Events*. It’s an arresting moment, when Means wipes off the greasepaint and squints in the klieg lights, laying bare his intentions—or his plaintive wish. And it resonates with irony, of course. Human suffering and death are the inescapable facts of existence, he’s telling us; wishing that life were otherwise is as futile as shouting into the wind, or trying to build mountains one spoonful at a time.

In *The Secret Goldfish*, Means’s new collection, his characters are no better off. An Illinois farmer is relentlessly dogged by lightning, which “speared him in the brow the way you’d poke a shrimp with a cocktail fork.” A young woman driving her Toyota during an icy, wind-blown night is swept off a bridge. “Michigan Death Trip” (in the spirit of the cult classic *Wisconsin Death Trip*) enumerates its carnage in a succession of vignettes: a head-on collision between a car and a truck transporting crated cherries produces “an abundance of fruit and blood and sparks spread out across the dark road”; a daredevil kid snowmobiling at night is decapitated by a telephone-pole wire; a guy high on speed breaks a fluorescent light tube against his friend’s face, slicing open his jugular.

But for all Means’s narrative reliance on tragedy, he never indulges in gothic excess. His prose is exquisitely modulated, at once elegiac and dispassionate, alive to both beauty and absurdity in the midst of horrific events. Here’s Means describing the fifth time the Illinois farmer is struck by lightning:

This time he and Agnes were safely ensconced in their summer rental in upstate Michigan watching the Cubs on



television. Agnes lay prone on the divan wearing only panties and a bra, exposing her long legs and her schoolgirl belly and the dimpled muscles of thigh. The cobwebby bolt radiated in a blue antimacassar across the window screen, collected itself, swept through the window, and seemed to congeal around her so that in that brief moment before she was killed, before the power failure plunged the room into black, he was granted a photo negative of her glorious form.

Moments like this, when an image is refracted to reveal an alternative perception, yield nuanced, textured narratives that have the constant capacity to surprise.

“It Counts As Seeing” focuses on a single incident—a blind man falling down the stairs outside a bank—from multiple points of view. Various witnesses describe conflicting interpretations of the event until the only single truth that emerges is that there is none. In the very structure of the story, Means calls attention to the limitations of traditional narrative, to prismatic effect.

Means’s formal experimentation doesn’t always work. “Counterparts,” for example, is an exercise in obfuscation, segmented into twenty-six sections titled “A” through “Z” that slide elliptically between the first- and second-person. But such is the occupational hazard of a writer who consistently worries the line between narrative and diversion, truth and imagination, realism and Calvino-esque fabulism. Means’s worldview is akin to that of the soon-to-be-divorced woman in the title story, who gazes at a goldfish swimming in a fishtank, fuzzy with

algae, and concludes, “The world is a mucky mess. It gets clotted up, submerged in its own gunk. End of story.” But Means is never content to end it here—he pushes us both forward and under, into the filmy depths. —Rebecca Donner

**Format:** 224 pp., hardcover; **Size:** 6 1/8" x 9"; **Price:** \$22.95; **Publisher:** Fourth Estate; **Editor:** Courtney Hodell; **Book designer:** Getty Images; **Text typeface:** Belén; **Time spent writing:** about seven years, mostly in the last four; **Number of serious migraine headaches suffered by author during writing of book (even after snorting Imitrex):** at least ten; **Representative sentence:** “They’d come up like a bunch of pigs, a wild writhing show of brute hunger, all those little fish mouths sucking for the pellets, and only so many pellets to go around.”