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*The Withdrawal Method*

Pasha Malla

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by Jeff Bursey

The thirteen stories that make up Pasha Malla's first book of fiction take place in unremarkable households, hospitals, streets, a dry Niagara Falls, and assorted other places that have an atmosphere familiar to Canadians. Yet, there is nothing border-patrolled about the concerns in the stories: boredom, loss, regret, and death are universal. *The Withdrawal Method* is, from its surface to its core, a work that concentrates on details instead of presenting a large picture, and this may strike some as unambitious. It is, rather, an intense and satisfying concentration on what we might consider humdrum or mundane matters.

In its series of small canvases there is an ever-present need on the part of minor and major characters to connect with others, or to understand why there is no connection anymore. Displays of deep affection are intermittent, sadness prevails, and intimacy is infrequent. Sex, when it occurs, is often masturbatory instead of with a partner. Most prevalent are neighborliness and scenes of communal meals where blood relations and adopted parties alike are important.

"The Past Composed" has Les living with his sister, Judy, after incidents have ended the life he knew, and their small unit briefly and suddenly expands to include a boy named Pico who likes to hang around. Board games, often a marker of family unity, recur, in this case not Clue or Monopoly but, appropriately, Trouble. Yet connections get severed, or are endangered, and the general mood is of a Sunday afternoon when you have a slight headache, just before spring begins, with the land starting to smell earthy but mucky snow persisting in shadow-covered grass.

Malla employs the technique of providing specific descriptions to show how certain characters are tuned into the close workings of the world (perhaps a reflection of his own concentration on writing). "Timber watched the crosswalk sign change from man to flashing hand," goes one paragraph in "Timber on the Wheel of Everyone," linking him to the obsessive nine-year-old narrator, Big Gal, of "Pushing Oceans In and Pulling Oceans Out" who regularly says things like: "I make sure the games are all square on the shelf. The edges have to be even and matched up equally, which is called symmetry. We learned it in math." This attention to the *whatness* of the everyday ripens in "Dizzy When You Look Down," a story about basketball games played by someone with sketchily described revolutionary motivations.

What Malla does right in certain stories is allow himself the freedom to not sound like many Canadian writers aged thirty to forty-five who have been force-fed the gruel of Raymond Carver, Alice Munro et al., instead of richer and more substantial authors like William Gaddis and Gilbert Sorrentino. Here and there Malla introduces the fantastic and the offbeat, or allows himself to display a sense of humour that leavens the grimness of the material.

"The Slough," the collection's first story, keeps the reader nicely off balance, and amused, in the third-person beginning where a woman tells her boyfriend that she's going to lose her skin

due a topical cream. “Topical? Do you mean like up-to-date? Current?” This kind of set-up and worldplay is promising, though once it enters the first-person the story loses momentum. “Big City Girls” shows Alex, a young boy, having his head messed with by his sister’s friends’ sex game and the potential ramifications. As seen by Alex very near the end, the girls outside look “as though someone had cut their pictures from a magazine and laid them down there, one by one, side by side.” That is a subtle and incisive comment, or prognostication, almost an aside, a technique Malla employed well in other places.

Many stories center on an impulse to unite. For variety, Malla shows in “Long Short Short Long” one boy’s cruelty to another (who persists in calling him a friend), and how that same tormentor later imagines a connection with a teacher that is unhealthy. Here, as elsewhere, Malla’s reliance on details about an average-day-in-an-average-life--a restrained ambit--marks him out as a domestic novelist, and that is meant as a compliment. He keeps his eye on siblings, fathers, and men and women whose lives take bad turns or peter out. Politics, the economy, war, and world events don’t intrude save for an eco-disaster that, one suspects, led to the drying up of Niagara Falls. Malla has a big tent approach and is not, on the evidence of *The Withdrawal Method*, interested in devising gigantic self-explanatory systems like those found in the fictions of Thomas Pynchon, Joseph McElroy, or Don DeLillo. Family is the first, and at times uncomfortable, refuge from systems, cruelty, and sadness; while it contains its potential for hurt and disappointment, it can also serve to keep one going when the world is too difficult.

The domestic aspect shows itself, among other ways, in how Malla layers the emotionality of men. To choose an illustrative example from one story, the widowed father in “Pushing Oceans In and Pulling Oceans Out” has to clean up his mentally-challenged seven-year-old son. “My dad Greg gets home at 5:58 and smells Brian right away and goes, Woo-wee buddy! He picks Brian up over one shoulder like a fireman and carries him upstairs. The tub goes on. I can hear them both laughing from my spot at the kitchen table and the water splashing around while my dad Greg washes the crap off my brother.” Often, fiction presents this as woman’s work, and as a depressing scene; instead, we’re shown tenderness and the love of father for his son.

In “The Film We Made About Dads” (its title reminiscent of Curtis White’s *Memories of My Father Watching TV*) there is this passage: “When it was time for the children to move away from home, the dads were strong. The wives wept in the driveways as the children pulled away in cars with couches strapped to the roofs, and the dads held the wives and stroked their hair. It would later be easy for us to erase the tears that ran down the dads’ faces. We have computer programs for that sort of business.” What we may be reading in this passage is a quiet rebuke to writers who programmatically erase emotional nuances from men, leaving them as caricatures expressing only anger, despair or coldness.

Malla’s engagement with the softer emotions felt by men, especially, is a strength of the fiction. Aligned to this is the overall calmness of the collection’s tone, even where a character feels extreme emotions. There is a catholic aspect to Malla’s view of the world. The use of playful humour helps, as the men don’t come out looking anything other than human; it functions on both the technical and human levels, and is sometimes missing in contemporary fiction. Humour’s sharper bite is present in “Respite” where the life of a novelist is portrayed. “But Womack was writing a novel, and he was doing good work. He had written more than one hundred pages. The words were coming. Sentences spilled into paragraphs spilled into chapters,

while on the periphery Adriane came in and out of the apartment like the mechanical bird in a windup clock.”