

Reprinted courtesy of *Rain Taxi*, vol. 14, no. 3 (Fall 2009), p. 37

*Waste*

Eugene Marten

Ellipsis Press (\$10)

by Jeff Bursey

There's nothing wrong with writing a book that's simply good. But publishers aren't happy with "good"—everything has to be so much more. In the particular case of *Waste*, Ellipsis Press presents us with a book heralded by none less than Gordon Lish "in wild proclamation." And *Waste* is definitely above average: it has economy, humor, an offbeat rhythm to its sentences, and it does manage to get into something marginal via its main character Sloper, a janitor who is also inclined to perverse sexual practices and murder. But as a book about the "purported invisible class," which here signifies something akin to Orwell's "proles," it makes a troubling equation between that class and deviancy. One need only compare, for example, Henry Miller's Paris books, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, or Larry Fondation's contemporary L.A. stories, to see fuller and more complex treatments of those considered beneath society's notice.

At first, it seems we'll follow Sloper as he cleans out the detritus from anonymous offices in an anonymous office building. He speaks little but observes well, and his sexual peccadilloes are suitably measured to everything else. Then, Marten's plotting goes off the rails. A woman in the office building is nice to Sloper, and when he finds her body in the garbage, he does what members of the invisible class always do: he takes her home, cleans her, drains her blood, pops her in the refrigerator, and has sex with her as much as he can. The slow corruption of the dead woman's body is paralleled by a lawyer in the building whose mind is deteriorating, going to waste like one of the partially eaten meals Sloper tosses away. In rambling phrases dictated into a machine, into thin air, and at Sloper, parts of the lawyer's life emerge, more puzzle pieces than anything else. In these soliloquies the reader can feel Marten straining to convey more than what is said.

So much of *Waste* is spent on necrophilia that it's legitimate to wonder why. From the outset there are indications that Sloper is an outsider partly by inclination, such as in this brief passage: "Most of the janitors wore their ID badges clipped to their breast pockets, and if they weren't looking at you their badges still were. Sloper's was clipped to his cart. He hadn't worn a badge that way since the city morgue..." The habit of making oneself disappear in this case goes along with the separation Sloper feels due to cultural differences, as when he realizes he can't connect with some people. "There was Vietnam and there was Mexico; Sloper was a language unto himself." Such snatches of well-written and concise prose indicate that Marten could have written more insightfully about Sloper's life, revealing him as emblematic of an entire population we often avoid; instead of getting closer to a *person*, however, we are presented with a sociopath. And we've seen this many times before. In the end, *Waste* is a tightly constructed narrative that misses some opportunities to dive deeper into the trash.