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Charactered Pieces / Caleb J. Ross

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Caleb Ross' stories do not behoove summaries. Let's just get that out of the way. Let's also just say that they contain blood drinking, deformity, death, and disfigurement, to varying degrees. These stories swirl like nightmares: a populace of anti-protagonists so wounded that there is generally no hope for their redemption. The reader acts as sponge, absorbing their pain. Making sense of it. As the reader, you are the first man on the scene; as such, you are to perform the tasks the characters themselves are no longer capable of performing: observe, record, and interpret. Seek your own closure. And be careful to distance yourself from these people, because they're collapsing stars, and you could be swallowed right along with them. Your job is only to do the above, and to pretend you don't share something universal with each and every one of these poor souls.

Oh, it's not as dire a task as it sounds. There is true wonder here: *Charactered Pieces* is a glass menagerie of deformity, a collection of short stories that is utterly fearless in its willingness to spill blood, shock, and soothe. Unlike most horror fiction, you can't step away and dismiss these stories with simple logic— they do not contain supernatural bogeymen, mad killers or fiends. These stories contain normal people crushed under the wheels of circumstance and the weight of guilt. The characters within are far beyond damaged— they are wrecked. Busted parents and screwed up kids; scarred, ruined, and weighed down with ten tons of remorse and pain wrapped in cancerous silence. Like individual flaws in the same junk diamond, they share some unspeakable pain in one way or another. But all this hurt isn't dreamt up for the author's detached amusement, or for the titillation of some nihilistic reader— this is a bid for communion where it is needed most. In each story the characters' struggles are the result of some long-incubated despair, intimate and undeniable as a deathbed rasp. Come close.

Listen: that the main character in *The Camel of Morocco*— an architect tortured by guilt after the collapse of a mosque on which he performed renovations— could reach the course of action that he does with the reader’s suspension of disbelief intact is a small miracle, if miracle is the word. These characters cry for empathy. You will be tested on whether you can abide.

This isn’t shock for the sake of shock. This isn’t to get a rise out of you; this isn’t a museum of cruelty. There is never the sense that Ross is toying with you, manipulating your sympathies. On the contrary, like a synthesis of Raymond Carver’s ability to paint in 100 shades of grey and Chuck Palahniuk’s reckless abandon for the limits of taste, *Charactered Pieces* is an honest look at the darkness that humans both create and endure; a catharsis by way of misery, sweating out the toxins. Apparently even pain can be beautiful— what else could explain feeling even remotely upbeat, as I did, at the end of the eponymously-titled first story *Charactered Pieces*, witnessing the main character lovingly painting the semi-formed toenails of an unborn fetus? Yeah. Out of context it sounds over-the-top, but within the context of the story it’s an act that is as loving as it is surreal.

Fathers fail; buildings collapse; people visit unending pain on themselves and their loved ones. Love. The word sounds unreachable, like a star whose death we haven’t yet recorded but whose light is still visible. Refracted through Ross’ prose— at turns both brutal and poetic— it can yield understanding. Maybe even hope. Like a collection of photos of our absolute worst moments, *Charactered Pieces* works to dull the edge of suffering through exposure; toughening the spirit, leading us into and through the places we fear. Though maybe we shouldn’t leap to conclusions on that hope business: “The wind sounds like wind,” closes *The Camel of Morocco*. The implication is that our guilt, however crushing, is to be dealt with. We are perhaps on our own.

Caleb’s website: www.calebjross.com



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