

On Death and Dying

Robin Romm's bereft narrators ache for parental presence

THE MOTHER GARDEN, fiction by Robin Romm. Scribner, 2007. Hardcover, \$22.

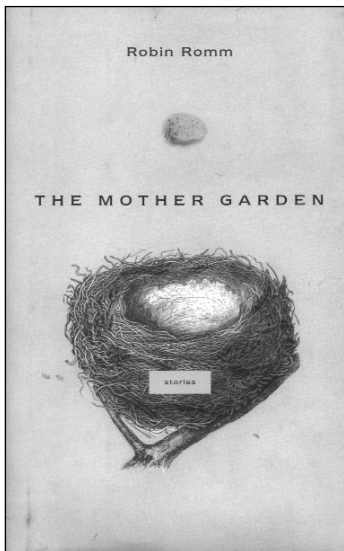
"I have been one acquainted with the night," writes Robert Frost. Reading Robin Romm's slim book of pointed, fragmentary short stories, one gets the feeling Romm too knows the night, the long empty hours haunted by those she has lost.

Or perhaps she's performing an authorial high-wire act, writing as though she feels as grief-maddened as Frost's narrator when her life has no such experiences. Romm hints at this in "No Small Feat," one of many stories in which the main character's mother has died (or is dying) of cancer. The narrator has discovered that her boyfriend, Kierny, used her mother's death to inspire a prize-winning short story, and she recalls that "Grover Edgar, a student in our graduate workshop, once said you could tell from Kierny's prose that he hadn't felt a whole lot of pain in his life. 'It's like what an alien might imagine human pain would feel like,' he said."

Romm's taut and sometimes devastating

stories, however, don't feel alien. She depicts the agonizing subtractions of terminal illness and the dull, draining anger and jealousy of caretakers who themselves need care they will likely never get again. Several narrators tend to their dying mothers as their fathers walk the dogs, walk out with other women or walk away. In "Celia's Fish," a man's desperation about the inexplicable, random cruelties of his wife's cancer make readers understand why some of those fathers might need to run.

But the fathers don't stay away. In the opening story — which takes place in Yachats; it's one of the times local readers will be reminded that Romm grew up in Eugene — the dog-walking father returns to commiserate with his lonely, angry daughter. In "Lost and Found," a woman finds her rude,



sloppy father lying near death in the desert, 26 years after she last saw him. A note tied to

him says, "This is your father. Do as you will." The narrator, too nice for her own good, takes him in. And when she needs him, he fails her once again — deeply, truly, immeasurably. To give some sense of Romm's delicate complexity as an author, that failure hits the narrator (and the reader) as both betrayal and relief.

The weakest of the stories — the title story and "The Family Epic" — combine whimsy with

massive grief; perhaps Romm found it a break from the painful missed connections of the other stories to deal in what might be called a form of magical realism, touches of the supernatural that weave perilously close to obvious metaphors for grief and recovery.

Yet this is a strong debut collection, with even the whimsical stories providing vivid imagery and tough emotional appeal. In grief, humans become mysteries to each other; we act in inconsistent ways, become paralyzed when faced with simple choices, return again and again to those memories that hurt the most. Or so Romm shows in this collection, where the loneliness and disconnection of loss lead rarely to epiphanies but more often to the reality of frail human emotions inside tender, decaying envelopes of flesh. **CW**

Robin Romm reads from The Mother Garden at 7 pm Saturday, July 14, at Barnes and Noble.

BOOK NOTES: **Diana Abu-Jaber** reads from and discusses *Origin*, 6:30 pm 7/12, Downtown Library. **Donna Beavens, Cai Emmons** and others read and speak at a gathering of women writers, 3:30 pm 7/14, Books Without Borders. **Josh Ticknell** reads from *Biodiesel America*, 2 pm 7/15, Powell's Technical Books, Portland. **Emma Bull** reads from *Territory* and **Will Shetterly** reads from *The Gospel of the Knife*, 7 pm 7/18, Powell's, Beaverton. **Alan Weisman** reads from *The World Without Us*, 7:30 pm 7/19, Powell's on Burnside, Portland.



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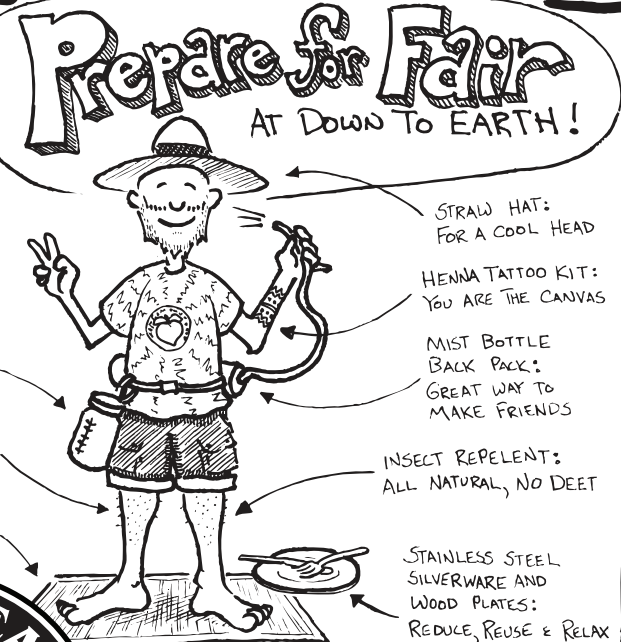
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