

FRONT PORCH

Not a Matter of Love

Beth Alvarado, *Not a Matter of Love*

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In “Phoenix,” a short story from Beth Alvarado’s first collection, *Not a Matter of Love*, Gloria travels with her seventeen-year-old daughter, Danika, from Tucson to Phoenix. Gloria, an artist turned art teacher, has garnered a meeting with a prominent Phoenix curator. At the gallery, the man politely compliments a few of Gloria’s older photographs, but of a newer, abstract photomontage says, “This image is, well, evocative but somehow...amorphous. Where do you want my eye to go?”

From a bird’s-eye view, Alvarado’s stories are, like Gloria’s slighted artwork, montage. In “Phoenix,” as in several other stories, the point of view shifts between mother and child. Perspectives mesh. The characters’ interior lives—as when Gloria and Danika drive to Phoenix, discussing and avoiding topics of sex and love—are equally weighted. Where, the reader might initially ask, is the eye, the focus, to land? But this roving point of view becomes Alvarado’s strength rather than her weakness. The story’s last lines playfully allude to the itinerant viewpoint: “‘Maybe I should drive,’ Danika said. When they got out of the car to change places, the air was still hot. The sky looked like a dark ocean, full of waves made silver by a moon that was nowhere in sight.” Alvarado’s fluid structure successfully and unpretentiously mimics life; the result *is* evocative.

Alvarado’s storylines are cleanly crafted and unambiguous, her details raw. In “Limbo,” Alvarado tells the tale of a Hispanic mother whose only son, Rey, is killed in a shootout. In the story’s opening, an anonymous woman phones the mother, Lena, and says, “I have your son’s liver.” The claim, like the circumstances of Rey’s demise, remains impossible to verify, though Alvarado reconstructs the shooting for the reader from Lena’s perspective. Alvarado writes, “Whenever Lena imagines the night of Rey’s death, she imagines it as a story.” In the succeeding paragraph, Lena’s point of view continues: “First the camera pans the apartment complex, the nearly deserted parking lot, the Mexican couple being questioned off to one side, the late model Chevy, one door open.” Soon, Alvarado deftly places us in scene with Rey and his compatriot Eddie, sans Lena.

Finally, though Alvarado’s stories also touch on romance, her characters are rarely romantic. In “What Lydia Thinks of Roses,” we witness a day in the life of the teenaged Lydia Montoya. The characters are staunchly prosaic, as when, midway into the story, “Tiffany looked at Lydia and tossed her hair. Lydia wanted

to ask her why she thought it was such an honor to suck a guy's dick." In the story's climax, Lydia destroys the roses she receives from her idiotic—though well-intentioned—trophy boyfriend Carlos, of whom she says, "No girl had been able to keep him faithful, so he was a challenge and she, Lydia Montoya, loved a challenge. She wanted to *win* the prize, not *be* the prize."

Aptly, the collection's epigraph is a quote from feminist Adrienne Rich, and Alvarado's female characters, like Ms. Montoya, refuse to defer to their male counterparts. But the male characters are not all like Carlos; they, too—such as the possibly schizophrenic Van in "Can You Hear Me?"—are composed of equal parts toughness and vulnerability.

Toward the end of the title story, "Not a Matter of Love," the protagonist, Jackie, "could suddenly see herself from her mother's point of view. All those years of raising her daughter to become someone else, a woman who would graduate *cum laude* from law school, or at least marry well, and there was instead an angry girl in baggy blue jeans and an old black sweater, a skinny girl who made jewelry in a bead shop and took Spanish and design classes at the junior college." Once again, Alvarado plays with point of view, blurring its literary meaning, and, instead, calling to mind its practical, day-in, day-out gist. The result is, like Gloria's artwork in "Phoenix," evocative. In this way, Alvarado's fictions are, in a manner reminiscent of Alice Munro, subtly metafictional. But Alvarado's collages are all her own, made from the rough, ocotillo and saguaro-peppered stuff of the American Southwest.

—Rebecca Hall