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Leslie Pietrzyk's *Admit This to No One*: A Review

Leslie Pietrzyk's short story collection, *Admit This to No One*, illuminates the lives of Washington D.C. residents. Following a cast of recurring characters whose lives are intertwined as well as several standalone narratives, Pietrzyk weaves social and political conflicts together in a series of stories that are all, ultimately, about power. In the words of the character Lexie, "politics is about power. Likely art is too." Not a moment goes by when the reader is not painfully aware of the power dynamics between any given characters and the tension they create.

This book is set to the backdrop of Washington D.C., which, as a setting, serves as both a symbol and connective tissue. In the abstract, the city represents politics and how everyone in the stories wears some kind of mask. This theme of facade runs through the entire book, especially when it comes to the elusive Speaker; everyone says one thing and means another, hoping to be more powerful than someone else. She creates an enticing dissonance between the characters' actions and their intentions that makes reading this book an experience akin to gossiping, complete with all of the accompanying discomfort and titillation. The city also connects the stories in a more literal way, bridging the gap between narratives that are, on the surface, unrelated. Two stories, "We Always Start with the Seduction," and "People Love a View," both take place on the Wilson Bridge, which invites comparison, even

though the first is about the Speaker seducing interns and the second is about a couple attempting to intervene in an incident between a Black man and a police officer. The setting makes you think about how all of the characters are working to their own ends, pretending they're noble (and, in some cases, believing it) as they disregard the wellbeing of the people around them.

A unique element of this collection is the cast of recurring characters that all exist in relation to the Speaker. The first story, "Till Death Do Us Part," introduces Madison, the daughter of the Speaker and a woman he had an affair with who he largely abandoned in childhood, moving on to yet another new family. Madison, as a narrator, sets the tone for the entire collection, her voice injected with biting teenaged cynicism. She carries herself with an at times cringeworthy mixture of precociousness and naivete, scoffing at "cow-faced" bystanders who lack the status she has only because of her connection to a father who, when asked directly if he hates her, responds "I barely know you." Pietrzyk revisits Madison in "Anything You Want," and then again for the final story, "Every Man in History," both of which show her struggling to connect romantically with men. In every story she's in, she grapples with what love really is because the Speaker never taught her, only able to feebly declare that "I do want to love someone" as she sleeps with married men. Pietrzyk also follows Lexie, the Speaker's daughter from his first marriage. Her first story, "Stay There," stands out because it is the only one in the collection not set in Washington D.C., though it's set largely on the journey there. Lexie is supposedly the one who escaped, the one who "stomped [the Speaker's] goddamn heart" and got away with it, cutting him off and becoming an artist and professor, far away from the world of politics. Yet she still ends up drowning in the sea of her father, letting her own career implode for an affair, just as her father did, and desperate for a child so she can finally know unconditional love. After the Speaker left his family "with such shameful finality," Lexie struggles to hold onto people, unable to shake this fear that they, too, will leave. He always holds that power over her, no matter how far she runs. In some ways, she has power over the student she's dating. She's powerless to aging, which she fears will cause the loss of her desirability, and along with it both her sexual power and power to have a child—this story is a tangled web of power structures imploding in on each other and themselves.

In addition to his daughters, the collection follows Mary Grace, a character who works for the Speaker and appears in "I Believe in Mary Worth" as well as the titular story, "Admit This to No One." A cutthroat Washington insider, Mary Grace is the Speaker's senior staffer, the most powerful person in the office until the boss walks through the door. Mary Grace is compelling because in "I Believe in Mary Worth," Pietrzyk presents her as sympathetic, a woman struggling to make it in a man's world and help other young women when she can. Yet, in "Admit This to No One," she is revealed to be an oppor-

tunist. She is with the Speaker because of where he can take her career, and cares more about getting ahead than whether or not she hurts people, stating that, to her, “bad news is perversely good news, because it’s a sure indication that she’s important. That she’s powerful.” The Speaker, though the driving force behind all these narratives, is only a protagonist in two stories, “We Always Start with the Seduction” and “Admit This to No One.” The former is fascinating in how distant and disingenuous the Speaker feels, even as we glean some insight into his inner world for the first time. Even at his most personal, the reader is held back and the mask never slips; he is so infuriatingly in control of his own narrative that even as he contemplates jumping off the Wilson Bridge, he views it from the perspective of the media, wondering “how the headline reporting his death would read, the size of the font.” His manipulation of events runs so deep that even the narrative lies to the reader to favor his version of reality, Pietrzyk ending the story in the masterful move of revealing “He’s lying, of course. Of course he is,” making the reader feel both betrayed at the manipulation and stupid for ever believing him.

The stories that stand alone, detached from this web of recurring characters, still focus on power, just in different ways, often stepping away from political and parental power. “Wealth Management,” the second story in the collection, focuses on two couples having dinner while the narrator’s wife, Chloe, is having an affair with the other man at the table, who she calls her “work husband.” This story had every muscle in my body clenched as all four grappled for power: the narrator, Drew, doesn’t care about his wife but is determined to prove himself to be superior to her work husband and also humiliate her as punishment; Chloe and her work husband are flirting overtly, and the work husband’s wife is flirting with Drew in order to get back at her husband. The whole scene, which consists solely of the couples talking at a table in a restaurant, is a power struggle that reveals that none of them care if they hurt each other or even innocent bystanders as long as they win. “People Love a View,” also has four people acting towards their own ends, only this time there are much higher, more physical stakes as a Black man is pulled over by a cop and his dog is mortally wounded. A woman, Jillian, inserts herself into the situation in order to help, but really only cares about keeping up the appearance of a good person and the social currency she will obtain from it. Her date, Patrick, scorns her even at the risk of appearing racist because she’s making him uncomfortable. The Black man goads the cop into shooting his dog just to make him feel bad. Again, everyone’s only thinking about themselves. This story and “This Isn’t Who We Are” deal primarily with racial power, “People Love a View” addressing white people being performatively antiracist and “This Isn’t Who We Are” dealing with internalized racism. The latter slips into the realm of metafiction, which happens twice in the book, ending with the haunting command “Read this, and pretend that it’s not

about you. Publish it, uneasily, as ‘fiction,’” a call to accountability from Pietrzyk herself. Indeed, the use of metafiction calls into question the power dynamics of the whole collection, written by a white woman who has power over all of the narratives.

One of the greatest strengths in Pietrzyk’s execution of this collection is her ability to write unlikable characters who are fleshed out, compelling, and for whom you end up rooting. As Jillian gets a man’s dog killed on the Wilson Bridge, the readers cannot be confident that she would have been a better person if she had walked away. As the Speaker’s daughters hurt their romantic partners, we can’t shake our pity for their misunderstanding of love, even when that romantic partner is a student being exploited by a professor. As Mary Grace grabs shamelessly at power, dismissing a sexual assault survivor on her staff, we attribute wisdom to her decisions because of how much she has struggled as a woman to make it in politics. Even the Speaker, so cold and calculated, has a moment when he claims that “He deserves this delight,” and doesn’t everyone deserve to find happiness, really?” There are no heroes and villains in this book. Every single character does at least one questionable thing, and none of them get happy endings; Pietrzyk often ends on disquieting moments with no closure. This collection is about the fight for power, and how it seeps into every aspect of one’s life—personal, social, political. The book doesn’t shy away from the gritty nuances of this struggle as it captures all the things that power really means.