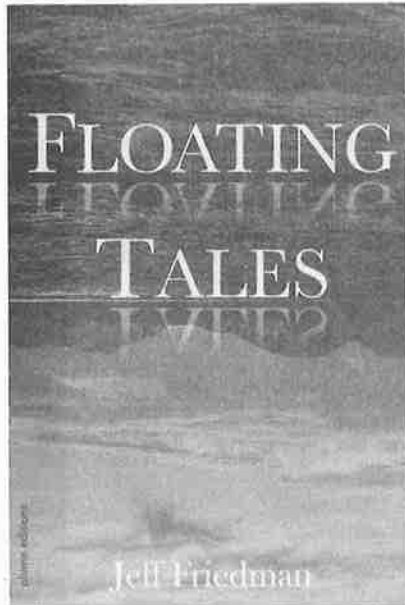


FLOATING TALES

Jeff Friedman

MadHat Press (\$21.95)



Floating Tales opens with a bit of epigraphic absurdity by the Russian poet Daniil Kharms. This gleeful portrait in miniature describes a redheaded man who has no hair (red or otherwise), no eyes, no mouth, no spine, no legs, etc. “He didn’t have anything!” Kharms crows. “In fact, it’s impossible to understand who it is we’re talking about here. I think it would be better if we change the subject now.”

This surreal description of a man with no qualities deftly prepares us for Jeff Friedman’s absurdity-laden myths, parables, and fables. Many reading this volume will remember that Kharms, a vocal resister of Stalin, starved to death in the asylum where he was forcibly committed. Clearly, readers should be on the lookout for themes of innocence betrayed, freedom suppressed, and authority gone rancid—as relayed in the humorous timbre of a chuckle.

Things go wrong—very wrong—in this *Floating World*: a bear drinks beer and puns

about it; the children of Lot argue over their mother’s salty carcass, strapping her to the top of the car and using her to season their food; a man’s tongue leaps from his mouth and refuses, like some Gogol nose, to return to its mouthy “prison.” These finely tuned parables, rendered in the conversational tonalities of matter-of-fact reportage, describe a reality in which the laws of nature, gravity, morality, and mortality are casually violated.

Friedman’s skill with multiple clauses—he never lets the massive amount of detail dominate the rhythms and requirements of narrative—allows him to avoid abstractions while suggesting philosophical quandaries. These are thought experiments, *what if’s* set in a world both wholly recognizable and not. Humor lies in a discomfiting union of ridiculous situations, odd responses, and the efficiencies of plot twists that refuse to clarify or justify. In one story, a man has a hole instead of a belly; he hears “a funny music” inside himself and feels “things moving as though someone were rearranging furniture in a room.” In another, a woman is eaten by her mini-skirt. Sometimes, Friedman’s prose seems almost aphoristic, as in “Certainty”: “Certainty backs you into a corner, ripping into your chest with its savage jaw. Soon, you bleed out all your doubt.”

Mini-absurdities work upon the spirits like irritants even as their philosophical weight accumulates. Here are Adam and Eve in the garden, the prophet Elijah at dinner, a dybbuk set loose upon the town, homicidal puppets, and a bear that demands beer:

“I don’t believe you’re a bear; you’re just a drunk disguised as a bear.” “No, I’m a bear disguised as a bear,” he answered, pouring himself into the bottle, where he became a bottle of bear. . . . Before he could pour himself out again, I chugged him down, the bear burning in my belly, demanding more, more.

The sheer multiplicity of these scenarios and voices could become repetitious if the author’s shrewd worldliness didn’t create small epiphanies, as in the portrait of a boss firing a worker in “Difficult Times”:

“I’ve been here ten years. Do you have to let me go?” I asked. Suddenly, he fell on the floor, doubled up, a fierce pain in his

gut. . . . He moaned so loudly he couldn’t hear me repeat my question, so loudly the floors and windows vibrated. . . . I couldn’t hear his breathing. Firing me had killed my boss. How would I explain that to Human Resources. Then miraculously he came to, smiling and cheerful. “You’ll be missed,” he said and jumped to his feet, extending his open hand.

Other stories are more affectingly surreal, as in this seeming tribute to Kharms, where a man is playing strip poker with his lover—and losing:

“Let’s keep going,” she says and deals another hand, then another and another . . . She turns over the cards until I discard my costume of flesh, my bones, my fountains of blood and step out of myself into air.

“One more hand?” she asks.

And here, what might have been yet another unlikely occurrence is set apart as horribly familiar:

After the shooting stopped . . . Some still typed cries for help into their cellphones. Some recorded their own breathing and played it back.

This short form story is, in Friedman’s hands, provocative, funny, and surprisingly profound. His earlier work—six volumes of poetry and one of translation—describes city life, factory work, complicated family dynamics, and imaginative restagings of Bible stories and myths. The poetry’s recurring motifs seem to have spawned the kinds of narrative structures cultivated in *Floating Tales*, where the popular forms of flash or sudden fiction are illustrative of what the Japanese define as the “floating world” of materialism, play, and pleasure. Underlying frivolity, however, is violence, grief, and alienation; one can trust no one and nothing. This collection describes the absurdity of the world we live in. The author’s visual and linguistic acuity allows each story to travel fast and far—*let’s change the subject now*—running from the banal and the domestic to the fantastic and the surreal, and reminding us that, as Vladimir Nabokov observed, “the cranium is a space traveler’s helmet.”

—Celia Bland