

## GOT NO SECRETS

By Danila Botha

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REVIEWED BY JIM BARTLEY

## A plunge into life's dark side

When I find a URL in a work of fiction, I can never resist an online search – which generally confirms the fiction. One of the strengths of the opening story in Danila Botha's debut collection is its stripping-away of the reassurances of the imaginary. The website in *Paradox* is real (the URL links cocaine and hookers) and a browse of it grounds the story. We encounter Jennifer in her own drug-addled voice, a university undergrad plummeting toward a crash and burn in the Internet sex biz. You look at the real porn site and see her in the fresh faces and splayed bodies of dozens of women barely out of their teens.

Botha plunges you into a psyche in the process of abandoning everything sustaining – school, friendship, family, food – in favour of the quickest route to the next tab of E or hit of heroin. Jennifer's desperation comes sometimes with a squalid intimacy: "My hands are dirty and I smell so bad. I want to fall down on the concrete and lie there in my



Botha plunges us into an addict's psyche and takes us into the crack-and-smack teenage demimonde. SHANNON WEBB-CAMPBELL

own mess. I want to die out here, my face scraped by the gravel." The force of the writing is formidable, until Botha's closing words slip unexpectedly into soft-focus messaging. "All everyone wants, I think, is to feel, to experience, to really see." And, "You can fill your life with more and more, but you can be left with less than you started with."

*Don't Talk Junk* takes us into

the crack-and-smack demimonde of teenage Angela and her record-producer boyfriend, Paul. The "junk talk" that Paul can't abide is the starry-eyed use of the L word. Still, when Angela announces that she's pregnant, he's all smiles. Botha's final words telegraph dawning hope. "Maybe a future is possible. We both stare ahead, into the distance."

*Smacked* offers another girl,

addicted, this time with a continental shift from Johannesburg (Botha's hometown) to the streets of Manhattan, where a new boyfriend quickly ups the ante from party drugs to heroin.

A more nuanced variation on the theme is *Heroin Heights*. Coco lives with her single mom in a decaying, crime-ridden quarter of Johannesburg. Her chronic kidney condition adds medical bills to her mother's burden. Coco's drug-dealing Zimbabwean boyfriend sometimes helps with extra cash. Meanwhile, their active and careless sex life is shadowed by the spectre of AIDS. Coco is a *dushi*, a mixed-race kid, adding to her outsider status. In the schoolyard, she's dubbed "Coconut": brown on the surface, white inside. Botha's setting is vivid and her character relationships well developed in this entry, drawing us inside these fraught and precarious lives.

*The Pregnant Man*, like several entries here, feels too cursorily conceived and written, more like a writing-school ex-

ercise, spurred by the headlines a few years ago announcing the world's first pregnant man. In six pages, we're rushed through decades, from Antonia's tomboyish childhood to the gender dilemmas of her teen years, her hormone therapy and transition to male identity, and finally a pregnancy at the age of 30.

In *Just, Quietly, Do It*, we join Katie, a Toronto teenager who calmly describes her tricks for minimizing bruising when her father throws her down the stairs. She has the inevitable high-school boy trouble, but what in most families would be considered ordinary sex play becomes for her parents a trigger for appalling physical abuse. The staying power of the tale lies in Botha's carefully inflected first-person narration. Numbed by brutality and her own denial, Katie comes to us in a voice drained of emotion, her account of domestic atrocities chilling in its dry simplicity and candour. » Jim Bartley is *The Globe and Mail's* first-fiction reviewer.